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Everybody who gets write permissions needs to color-tag their contributions so I can figure out who's who. If you've got permission, choose a color and write your name here (and those who didn't choose a color, I chose for you. Voila: Mal Dartz Fox Rob Firv BA Dakota ECSNorway Bob JFerio

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--Kurt Vonnegut

part the zeroth: where we learn a little about how the world works

"Everything happens for a reason."

That's what most of us are taught, and for a broad enough definition of 'reason,' it happens to be true. Cause and effect is one of the basic mechanisms of the Cosmos.

Some of us are taught that there are Prime Movers out there that are responsible for things happening. And that's true, to an extent: none of the Prime Movers out there exist *outside* the Cosmos, they all spring from the same explosion (or implosion, or *jes' happened*) of matter that makes up stars, planets and little mortal things like us. But there are Prime Movers out there, working their will on the fabric of the Cosmos.

The dirty little secret is that every last one of those Prime Movers are also *titanic assholes*. The theologian on the street might prefer the term "ineffable," and claim that it's not *our* place to know what *their* motives are, but let's face it: they're assholes.

Today, we're going to look at the works of one group of the Prime Movers, best known throughout the Cosmos as the Alien Space Bats. The Space Bats are beings of vast and incomprehensible intellect who like to play with branches of the infinite multiverse. Nobody knows how they do it, and nobody knows why they do it; those inclined to theorize think that it's the cosmic-being equivalent of a schoolyard argument. Whatever the reasoning, the Space Bats have focused their attention on two universes.

The first universe is one not too dissimilar from our own, but in some ways it's very different. Here, a small thing overlooked - somebody remembered to pick up a packet of cigars left behind - led to incredible changes. The world of Timeline-191 is one of nearly-perpetual war, with the

next big one only a few months away. The quasi-fascist alliance of the British Empire, the Kingdom of France and the Confederate States of America are powering up the machinery of war, while the militaristic, jingoistic and only slightly better nations of the Second Reich and the United States of America wait for the hammer to fall.

The second universe is a world in flux. The miracle substance called handwavium has enabled the conquest of the solar system. The new power on the block is the Fenspace Convention, a rough alliance of science-fiction fans, otaku and other assorted nerds who've taken the promise inherent in handwavium and run with it. The rest of the world is cautious, waiting to see how the Convention survives. While things aren't as good as they could be, this world is enjoying a period of relative peace and prosperity. The Fen are in the heavens, and all's right with the world.

Neither world is aware of the other. The Fen recently learned that the Cosmos is much greater and stranger than they knew, but the demands of colonization and civilization have kept them from exploring across the timelines. The people of Timeline-191 have no knowledge, ability or interest in such things; the physics necessary to describe the situation hasn't been invented there yet.

In the ordinary state of affairs, the paths of the Fen and Timeline-191 would never cross. But these are not the ordinary state of affairs.

The Alien Space Bats have taken an interest in these two timelines, and the changes they'll make will shatter conceptions, change minds and reduce paradigms to splinters. It's the last few minutes of November 18th, 2016 in Fenspace and 1940 in TL-191. When the clock strikes midnight, the Space Bats will make their move and things will get very strange.

The hall is rented, the orchestra engaged. Everybody take their places, please. It's time to engage in a little comic-opera we like to call...

(music: ["End of the World"](#) Great Big Sea, *Rant And Roar*)

The South Is Rising

(Someone Get A Hammer)

a Fenspace Infinities story

directed by S. M. Breen & acted by the Fenspace Collective

part the first: where the world turns upside down

USS Remembrance, 22.5 miles off the coast of New England
18 November 1940, 18:45 EST

(we catch up with Turtledove POV character #1, Lt. Sam Carsten, watching the stars in the early evening)

~***~

Fog had been rolling in all evening. This wasn't uncommon in some places – in San Francisco people just shrugged and put on their coats – but in other places the fog seemed decidedly unnatural. Captains in the Gulf of Mexico cursed as the fog started making life difficult for the boats returning after a long day's fishing.

~***~

Vulpine Fury's Puppet Works, Kandor, Luna
18 November 2016, 23:55 Lunar Standard Time

"Glad you could get away, sis," Eljay said, smiling as he broke the hug. "almost thought you weren't going to be able to be here for Thanksgiving."

"I almost wasn't," Jen Macready replied. "The farm is going gangbusters, and the boss really didn't want to let me go, but when I told him that I was going to spend Thanksgiving in Kandor, well..." A fey and feral smile graced her lips, prompting Eljay to laugh.

"What did you promise to bring him?"

"He wants a moon rock."

Their conversation was interrupted by the happy squeal of an 11 year old boy and a biomimetic android. Jen's son, Braden, and Eljay's daughter, Lime, were goofing around.

"Lime, sweetie?" Eljay asked.

The brunette android immediately turned to face him, leaving Braden comically overbalanced. "Yes, Daddy?"

"Remember what I told you when I said that Aunt Jen, Braden and Uncle Cosh were coming up?"

Lime stood up straight and nervously poked her fingers together. "That I could play and hug, but to remember my strength?"

Eljay beamed proudly. "That's right. Good girl. You can go back to playing."

"Ya-hoo!" Lime pirouetted and resumed the game of tag that had started among the display puppets.

"Sometimes," Jen mused, "it's hard to believe that she's an android."

"The wonders of the wave, sis," Eljay said. "So, how do we want to handle Cosh's surprise party Sunday?"

"I'm sure we'll figure something out, bro," Jen said. With that, they began to work out the details and catch up on family events since the last time they got together.

~***~

The fog continued to build, getting thicker and thicker until it was impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. Flights were canceled, aircraft and spacecraft diverted from airports on the coasts to places without the impenetrable fog. Traffic on the edges of the country ground to a halt.

~***~

**Korolev Air Force Base, Luna
18 November 2016, 23:55 LST**

(twee twee twee...)

"So what's the widget?"

"This," Sora said proudly, "is the new model of DQS detector."

"DQS... oh, right," Mal said. "The interdimensional incursion detector. I never quite got why you called it that."

Sora shrugged. "It's a 'you had to be there' thing. It made sense at the time."

"Fair enough. So, are we expecting an invasion from beyond the crystal spheres? Do I need to get out the good china?"

Sora swatted Mal. "Jerk. No, this is one of Kohran's experiments. She figures that we can tie a bunch of detectors together and use them to do detection at a distance."

"Like a long-baseline interferometer, but instead of radio telescopes you're using these

detectors.”

“Exactly. Kohran’s got the main array on *Stellvia*, I’ve got this one here, there’s another one out on *Odyssey* – Julian’s watching that – AC has one on the *Forge*, and we’re hoping to get another into *Atalantae* soon.”

Mal whistled. “Impressive.” A pause. “What do you think you’ll find with your dimensional interferometer?”

“Well...” Sora thought about it. “We’re not sure,” she finally said. “I think we might find some more world-jumpers like the Girls, but we don’t really have a good way of knowing *what* we’re going to find.”

“Then again, not knowing what you’re going to find is the fun part of science,” Mal said, then yawned. “Damn, I must be tired. You going to be up a little longer?”

Sora nodded. “I’ve got it running, so there’s just a few more tests. Probably another half-hour or so.”

~***~

Charleston, South Carolina
November 18, 1940 18:58 EST

Anne Colleton looked out at the wall of haze blocking Charleston Harbor and felt an odd tingling in her skin. It was a sensation she’d had a few times before, and every time it held the same feeling of... anticipation. Something was happening, something *big*. The first time she’d felt it was when she’d got the news the Reds had burned Marshlands to the ground and killed her brother Jacob. The next time was when she first met Jake Featherston, then a bush-league politician on the make. Both times the feeling of anticipation swept over her as a faint tingle.

This time, the tingle was strong enough to make her hair stand on end. Anne was sure that the fog had something to do with it.

~***~

Conference Building, Pasadena Conference Center
Pasadena, California
18 November 2016, 15:58 PST

Charles Anderson, the second-most junior public relations specialist with the Artemis Foundation, turned his attention away from the droning of the middle-manager at the podium and whispered in his co-worker’s ear. “If this idiot actually knew how to put together a

presentation, we'd be halfway back to Beta by now. Are you as bored with this empty suit as I am, darling?"

Minerva Swansen, the most junior geologist with the Artemis Foundation, leaned closer to her husband. "I think so, but I'm still awake, so maybe not."

"Let's get a coffee or something before we head back Up." He glanced out the window. "That's odd."

"What is?"

"You grew up in this part of California. Is it normal for there to be this much fog this time of day?"

~***~

Still the fog continued to build, growing thicker and heavier with each passing moment. By now, nobody on either side of the fogbanks believed that this was a natural phenomenon.

In two universes people watched and waited. It felt like the whole world was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen.

~***~

North America

November 19 (2016/1940), 00:00:00 UTC (Event T0)

The clock ticked over, and *something happened*.

The fog grew still, unnaturally so, as if the moisture in the air had turned to concrete. Inside the wall of mist, the few people still out on the streets could see strange lights playing inside. The lights flickered, twisted and then exploded outward, lighting up the nearby countryside for a few bare milliseconds.

For a few brief moments, it seemed as if the light was coming from everywhere at once. No shadow was cast on the ground beneath. It was an eerie instant of pan-luminescence. Dogs barked and howled madly, dashing in panicked circles, or straining at their leads to run away. Some people of an older generation dove to the ground, ducking down against nearby walls or inside doorways, covering themselves against the expected blast.

There was a distant rumbling sound, like thunder heard from far away ... then a terrible, dreadful stillness.

The fog started to melt away. Slowly at first, then picking up speed, the fog vanished, leaving

behind new countryside merged together.

(High above the cloud deck, a lone weather balloon had the best seat in the house for the event. Recovered several days later, the audio recorder someone stuck on for ballast would pick up the roll of thunder, along with the sound of gigantic leathery wings flapping and what everybody who heard it would swear was the sound of snickering.)

A ferry pilot off Bedloe's Island looked up at the statue in front of him, illuminated in the light. In place of the sword, he could've sworn he saw Lady Remembrance holding a torch to the sky. He blinked and it was gone.

In Hawaii, phone and Internet connections broke off mid-word, leaving behind puzzled users. The vacationing President's dedicated satellite connection to the White House cut off without warning.

A mechanic at Boston's Logan Airfield thought for a brief moment that he could hear an ear-splitting whine, as if someone was forcing air through dozens of turbines of some sort. The feeling passed, and all he could hear was the piston engines of the aircraft on the tarmac.

In Mexico, the land looked much as it always did, though the people of Villa Ocampo looked north at the new lights on the horizon and tried to figure out what this meant.

In Quebec, a Canadian engineer watched the load on his generators suddenly drop off.

An operator at the Midwest ISO control centre in St. Paul was startled to find that somehow, he'd lost all generation coming in from Manitoba. He raced to keep the grid from collapsing.

A group of homeless men, gathered together for warmth on Atwater Drive in Detroit, gazed in wonder as the fog cleared and revealed gleaming towers of steel and concrete on the river's far side.

Off the New England shore, Sam Carsten watched the stars come out and wondered.

Far out in space, the duty officer at *Benjamin Franklin Station* blinked as the high-security line to the 21st Space Wing in Colorado dropped out.

And elsewhere in the Solar System....

SS Ciara, 510 km over Utah

18 November 2016, 23:59:45 UTC

"Look, we can't carry that much pressurized," Captain Garret spoke into the telephone, "We don't have enough space aboard." He yawned. It was too damned late for this.

"What about a cabin?" queried the voice. "If you weren't carrying passengers, you could stick some in free cabins?"

"That's not going to be cheap," Garret warned him. Never mind that on a Seattle trip, they'd probably have been empty going back up anyway.

"I can handle it, so long as you can handle American,"

"We prefer Euros but sure. Pay us in cash at the dock." Payment upfront, as usual, to order fuel.

"No problemo man. Don't think you'll be gettin' in tonight though, there's some weird weather we got down here."

"Don't doubt the *Ciara*. We'll get in on time," he reassured him.

"I hope so man, I'll...fhsh...ee...you in ...jasshh," Garret winced as the channel cut out with a static scream in his hear.

"Hello," he tried.

Nothing but a hiss.

"Jimmy, you there bud?"

Silence

"Hello?" he tried one last time. "Bugger,"

"Come to bed," Meg said sleepily from behind him.

Tempting, but... "The high-gain's buggered itself again."

"Well it can wait until tomorrow. You work yourself too much,"

"That's the definition of captain," he smiled back at her. "I'll just sort this. It's probably nothing"

He contacted the bridge.

~***~

Milly Jackson had her feet up in the rebuilt server room, yawning as she watched the download come in. Stupid 'danelaw server was only pushing a few megabytes a second. She'd planned to

get *Sam*, *Seán* and *Sed* back up and running hours ago, but the Fenspace mirror had crashed, so the only working one with decent speed was somewhere in the US.

She watched the bytes tick by.

Then stop.

Error: The source location on the server could not be read

She swore.

And tried to restart.

Error: Server not found.

She pinged the local relay. It answered. She pinged the nearest node. It answered. She pinged her favorite yaoi site. It answered. She pinged the download server.

Nothing.

She pinged Google.fen. It answered. She pinged her old home server back in Detroit. Nothing. She pinged Google.com, specifically trying the Mountain View address. Nothing. Then the orbital relays stopped answering.

“Oh for cryin' out loud,” It looked like something had failed between orbit and ground. They could get Fen sites fine, but nothing from below. They must've lost the base station. “That gosh-darned high-gain's gone down again,” she concluded.

She picked up the intercom, and called the bridge.

~***~

Korolev Air Force Base, Luna
19 November 2016, 00:00:02 LST

The dimensional incursion detector on Sora's workbench warbled, the diagnostic screen filling with information. The warble became a screech, and as Sora hastily reached to cut the power it died with a flash and a puff of smoke.

“GAH!” Sora yelled; the dying act of the detector burning her fingertips. “Itte...”

Mal stuck his head back in the workroom door. “Sora? You okay?”

"Yeah, yeah... just a little singed."

"What happened?"

"It blew up on me!"

"Isn't that what Kohran's inventions usually do?" Mal asked. Sora gave him a dirty look.

"This one shouldn't have. It's been tested and we both certified it bug-free. Furthermore-"

What Sora was about to say was cut off by the base alarm system going off at full blast. *"Attention all personnel," GLaDOS's voice sounded, "VVS data systems are under class one infowar attack. Network lockdown initiated. Central Committee please report to the situation room. All non-essential personnel are to remain at Condition Two status. Repeat, VVS data systems are under class one infowar attack. Network lockdown initiated. Central Committee please report to the situation room."*

Mal and Sora looked at each other, and he slammed down on the nearest intercom button. "GLaDOS, sitrep," Mal ordered.

"General, your presence is required in the situation room."

"I got that part. Summary please."

"At zero-hundred hours VVS datasystems lost major internet connectivity on the terrestrial backbone. I concluded the network was under denial-of-service attack and sounded Condition Two. A full briefing will be available in the situation room."

"Zero-hundred hours..." Sora looked thoughtfully at the broken incursion detector.

"I don't like what you're thinking," Mal said.

"Neither do I. GLaDOS, please grab the raw data from the laptop on my bench and move it into a navigational database accessible from the situation room, thank you."

"Easier done than said, O Captain. Anything else? Doors opened?"

"Yes, please. Call *Stellvia*, priority channel. I need to talk to Kohran."

~***~

SS Ciara

19 November 2016 00:04 UTC

On the bridge, Misha stared at the comm panel.

“Captain, Captain,” she said, sounding impossibly giddy thanks to having just downed her daily can of soft drink, “It’s not us I swear.” she pushed a few buttons to be doubly sure, “High gain checks out A-OK! We’re sending and receiving, it’s got to be a ground problem,”

“Try and find another downlink,” he ordered.

“Already on it,” she beamed, “But it looks like everything down in the litterbox has gone dead. I’m getting more than a lot of chatter on the radio too”

“Calm down will you. What are they saying?”

“Sorry,” she giggled. “Bad time of the day. Most are saying the same as us. They just lost all 'net and radio connections on this side of the planet,”

Outside the window, she could see the United States shrouded in night, a few sparks of light in the shadows marking the cities.

Hmm... it looked different somehow. There was less light on the Eastern side.

“Alright, I’m on my way up,”

She heard someone complain the in background before he hung up. A moment later, the call light lit up again.

“Bridge Misha,” she answered it.

“Misha,” the catgirl recognised Milly’s voice. She sounded tired “Did we lose the high-gain again?”

“No no,” she reassured the computer tech, “High gain is working fine.” she triple checked, “The problem’s in the connection, and it’s not just us,”

“Right, I’m coming up there. Hang on.”

The catgirl sighed. The first time they let her keep watch, and it wasn’t going very well, was it?

~***~

Main Operations Center, *Stellvia* Station
November 19, 2016 00:00:05 UTC

The first indication anyone had that anything was wrong was when the DQS alarm went off. The second indication was when the DQS detector exploded.

“What the hell did you do, Ray?!”

“Not my fault, I swear to God it’s not my fault.” The duty officer thumbed the intercom. “Commander Scott and Engineer Li to Ops.”

Kohran was the first to arrive, as the duty tech finished emptying a fire extinguisher on the abused DQS detection console. “Wah!” she cried. “What happened?!”

“Don’t know, ma’am,” the duty officer replied. “The DQS alarm went off and a second later the console blew up. Other than making sure there was no fire, we haven’t touched it.”

“Blew up?” Kohran said, confused. “It’s not supposed to do that. Let me take a look,” she said, scooting under the damaged console, tools in hand.

Noah Scott strode into the operations center, *still buttoning his shirt*. “Report.”

The duty officer swiveled her display so Noah could see. “Three minutes ago we had a massive DQS event. It was big enough that it fried the sensor.”

“Damn. Where in the station is the incursion?”

“We’re not sure it’s *in* the station, sir. Best we can determine is that it’s somewhere within two light-seconds of Stellvia. Beyond that...” the duty officer shook her head.

Noah paled. “Two light-seconds...” he said, staring at the screen, “for the incursion to *burn out* the sensors from that far away it must have been huge. Get Miyuri and Takami up here - I want an analysis of the data the sensor returned just before it burned out. We’ve got to find this thing, people.”

Safety drifted up to Noah’s ear. “Noah-san, VVS Korolev is on priority channel one, they want to speak with Kohran-san.”

Noah sat down and unlocked his private workstation. “I’ll take it here, Safety,” he said. Clicking on the monitor: “Hello, Mal.”

“*Sorry Dad, wrong person.*”

Noah blinked. “Sora?”

"Do you have any other Red daughters I don't know about?"

"What's wrong?"

"I need to talk to Kohran, please."

"She's a little busy, and we're in the middle--"

"Of a huge dimensional incursion event that happened a couple of minutes ago and blew out the DQS sensor."

"Yours blew up, too?"

"I'm afraid so, Dad."

"Is there anything I can help you with?" he asked.

A muffled voice from behind Sora: (*"What's the holdup?"*)

("It's Noah; Kohran's busy,") Sora replied. Then, to Noah: *"Dad, we need your DQS readings, can you squirt it to us? I'm going to see if Kohran's interferometer idea works and try to triangulate the event location."*

Noah glanced at Safety, who nodded sharply. "Data's on the way, Sora." he said.

Sora looked offscreen. "Got it," she said. *"Thanks, Dad. I'm running the results now."* She dropped out of view, leaving Noah face to face with Mal Fnord.

Noah found himself at a bit of a loss. "So, um," he said, "how are things over there?"

"Hectic," Mal replied dryly. *"You?"*

"Much the same." The briefest of awkward pauses. "Do we know what we're dealing with here?"

"Not yet." Mal paused. *"We have some really bad suspicions, but we're running the data before panicking."*

"Oh?"

"Yeah." Mal paused again, this time for longer. *"Just after the incursion detector blew, GLaDOS saw a huge chunk of the Internet backbone go missing."*

Noah ran the implications of that through his mind. "Oh," he said faintly, "that's not good."

Mal nodded. *"No it isn't, which is why I want confirmation before--"*

Sora popped back up into frame, eyes wide and face just as pale as her father's. *"I've got a location,"* she said shakily. *"The event epicenter was Earth, longitude 39 degrees, 50 minutes north, latitude 98 degrees, 35 minutes west. The approximate radius of effect was 2100 kilometers."*

Dead silence on both ends of the line.

"Well, fuck." Mal said it with deep feeling.

"In accordance with the rules set down in the Articles of Convention," Noah said heavily, "I am calling an emergency SMOFCon and Convention, to be held immediately."

Mal nodded, eyes grim. *"You round up the troops, I'm going to start recon, get some data on what's going down. Be sure to get everybody, Noah. No stragglers."*

"Everybody?"

*"Everybody. As Buckaroo might say, right now we're **all** on the Global Frequency."*

~***~

Honolulu, Hawaii

18 November 2016, 14:05 HST

{'Danelaw, interlude: Ze President of Ze United States (uptime) has been taking the last week and a half off after a tough reelection fight. Settling in for an afternoon nap, the Secret Service come in, announce that There's A Serious Problem, Sir, We Need To Get You To A Safe Place., etc.}

~***~

SS Ciara, Earth Orbit

"So that's it Captain. The whole lot's just not answering." Misha finished her explanation.

Garret yawned and looked around

"Somebody took down the Earthside receivers," he concluded, "Which took down phone lines too, because they go through the same circuits." At least, he thought they did.

"Must be!" Misha chirruped, painfully cheerful

"What's everyone else saying?"

"The same thing basically. Everyone's going crazy. Major faction sites are starting to overload."

Great. Just great, thought the Captain.

"Keep trying," he ordered. "Listen for any signal at all coming up from the ground. Maybe we'll get some news from a major station."

"Aye Captain," she smiled.

Yawning, he sat down in his customary chair, trying to figure out what was going on. A terrorist attack on the 'danelaw?

Milly burst through the hatch. "Captain," she blinked, surprised to see him there.

"It's not us," Garret explained. "It's affecting all of Fenspace too,"

Milly's face turn the same shade of green as her hair. What could bring down the freakin' internet? Did somebody take out the downlinks? Had Congress pulled the plug on it using some sort of secret top-kill? Why?

She took the pilot's seat, not that she actually could fly the ship.

"Captain, I'm getting something from Earth," Misha announced, "It's sounds funny though, on AM radio."

"Put it through,"

"I'm Jake Featherston, and I'm here to tell you the truth." announced the speakers, before launching into a speech that sounded much like a dub of Adolf Hitler with an American twang.

"I've heard that name before," said Milly, calmly. "Where have I heard it?"

"Dunno, it's your head," Misha giggled.

"Great, we picked up Klan FM," deadpanned Garret. "Shut it off. Try and find something better,"

"AM," Misha corrected him, "And done." Featherston's voice died abruptly.

A few moments of silence, while the Captain, the catgirl and the computer specialist tried to

understand what they'd just heard. Another button on Misha's panel lit up, flashing in time to an electronic chirp.

She pushed it, to be rewarded by a simple text message sent to the entire fandom.

“Captain,” she said, calmly, “Noah Scott of *Stellvia* just called an emergency Convention.”

Silence again. The ship's engines kept running. Garret exhaled a long sigh, remembering what had happened the last time he'd heard the words 'emergency Convention'... and what had happened to good friends of his afterwards.

“Alright,” he stood up, adjusting his old jacket, the one he'd had since launch day. “We need everyone awake. Bring the ship to battlestations.”

~***~

Brasstown Bald Observatory and Firewatch, Blairsville, Georgia, CSA November 18, 18:05 Eastern Time

Arthur Woody settled his weary bones down for an evening's stargazing after a long day tending the newly stocked deer herd in the Chattahoochee Wilderness Reserve. He'd seen the last native deer shot as a boy, and it did him good to finally have them back in these woods.

He adjusted his suspenders for a more comfortable fit and turned to his telescope. “Bout time that damn fog lifted.” He began his scan of the skies with the Moon, and stopped cold at what he saw. A strange bright spot to the northeast of the Mare Serenitatis. He pulled out his charts and began the effort of trying to identify it, but some motion in the skies caught his attention. Mouth suddenly dry, he trained his telescope on one of the brighter ones.

“Is...” he said aloud. “... is that a *battleship*?”

~***~

Tom's Little Havana, Kandor City, Luna 19 November 2016, 00:06 LST

At this time in the morning, when the late diner rush was a faint memory and most people were out looking for a more energetic party Tom's had quieted down a great deal. The crowd had thinned enough that seats were easily available, even given the cramped and tiny nature of the bar and the omnipresent cloud of smoke had also thinned to a faint blue haze that was probably mostly wave free.

Seated in the comfortable chairs tucked into the corner between the bar and kitchen, three

heads were bent over their cards. The table between them covered with empty glasses and the demolished remains of the kitchen's finest appetizers. Arthur Nkomo, OGJ troubleshooter grade 7 grinned suddenly, white teeth flashing in his dark face. He drew a six of clubs from his hand and laid it on the table, on top of the four and five of diamonds already there.

"Fifteen for five," he said, reaching for the board and moving a peg forward.

Sitting across from him a large and rather craggy man examined his own hand and sighed. His stubby, blunt fingers carefully selected a Jack of spades from his own hand and dropped it on the table. "Twenty-five," Rumble said in a deep, gravelly voice.

The third player adjusted his glasses and contemplated the cards. F was about to play when Arthur's smart phone began to ring, and he sat back to let his boss take the call.

Arthur grumbled and dug his phone out of his pocket, scrolling quickly through his email. He stopped, suddenly, and blinked in surprise. A moment later he had re-read the message and was already on his feet. "Sorry, but it looks like we're done for the night," he said.

F and Rumble exchanged a glance and stood themselves, Rumble stepping his large and rocky body delicately around the furniture. "What's up Boss?" asked F.

"Emergency alert from Arisia," Arthur said. "Do not know what it is yet. Come on we..."

He was interrupted by every smart phone and email device in the bar going off at that moment. Rumble was the first to dig his 'waved blackberry out. He swore loudly at the device and began moving towards the door, bulling his way through the crowd with his bulk. F and Arthur followed closely in his wake.

"Think the Emergency Convention's related?" F asked.

Arthur merely glared at him.

F shrugged at him as they squeezed through the door. "Well, at least with Stellvia calling it we know it's not Herself getting all worked up about something."

Ahead of them Rumble snorted. "Nah, that ain't likely," he said. "I'll talk to you guys later. Gotta get to the Watchtower."

F and Arthur waved as he turned off down a side corridor. They shared a glance and broke in to a run, heading for the Great Justice liaison office.

Gagarin Crater Air Force Base
19 November 2016 00:15 LST

It's a general rule that you shouldn't put an excitable genki girl in charge of anything more complex than a toaster oven. The Soviet Air Force liked to break those general rules, partly just to show that 'general rules' were a bunch of crap, but mostly for their own amusement.

"C'mon c'mon c'mon c'mon LET'S GO!" Junior Lt. Tomo Takino, daring VVS X-COM pilot, was revved up and ready to go inside her virtual cockpit. Her steed for this mission, the Soviet Ga-15 fighter, gleamed faintly in the launch tube lights.

Her wingmate and superior officer for the mission, Lt. Yomi Mizuhara, was a little less ready to go. "Dammit, Cannonball! Calm down and finish the checklist!" she snapped, trying to focus on finishing her preflight instead of Tomo's ranting.

"Aw, Yomi! We're doing a high-speed run on the USA! Dodging anti-missile radars and TSAB black-project fighters! Adventure! Combat! This is going to be exciting!"

"You hope it'll be exciting; I hope this is nice and boring."

"Stick-in-the-mud."

"Glory-hogging lunatic."

"At least glory's the only thing I hog!"

"WHY YOU-"

"*Ahem.*" Shad "Big Boss" Houben cleared his throat, and that was enough to stop his subordinates from attacking each other. "If you two are finished?"

The two pilots were immediately contrite. "Yes, Boss, sorry Boss," Tomo said.

"Right, you know the mission, just do the job and don't engage any hostiles, if there are any. You'll be reporting directly to the Committee at Korolev. Comm designation for this mission is Hawk Flight."

"Got it, Boss," Yomi replied. "Say, this thing's really got the brass in an uproar, doesn't it?"

Shad paused. "It does," he said. "Hopefully it's nothing. Your job is to find out."

"Understood, sir." Tomo said, as close to 'all business' as her fundamental makeup would allow. "We'll find out what's happening."

"Very well. Hawk Flight is cleared for launch."

“WOO! Hawk Two, LAUNCH~!” Tomo yelled. The magnetic catapult in the launch tube responded by throwing Hawk Two out into the lunar landscape at 30 gees.

“Tomo...” Yomi growled. “Hawk One, *launch!*” The catapult in Hawk One’s tube threw Yomi headfirst into space. For all her annoyance at her wingmate, Yomi couldn’t help but smile as the acceleration from the catapult was replaced by the even harder acceleration of her fusion torch. While it wasn’t where a digital schoolgirl from the Tokyo suburbs *expected* to end up in life, she just couldn’t imagine anything more exciting than the thrill of flight.

~**~

Catching up with Tomo was easy enough; Yomi had plenty of experience in that. Chewing her out for leaping without looking was even easier. The rest of the short trip from Luna to Earth was quiet, both pilots only breaking silence to check back with the command staff at Korolev Air Force Base.

“Hey,” Tomo said as they approached North America from the east, “I’ve got a ping, coming up over the hill.”

“Ours or theirs?”

“Ours, I think. IFF pings as SS *Ciara*, looks like they’re on a landing trajectory for Europe.”

“Hawk Flight, Korolev Actual. Hail the Ciara, see what they know.”

“Roger that, Korolev.” On the common Fen band: “SS *Ciara*, SS *Ciara*, this is VVS Hawk 1, please respond, over.”

“We hear you, Hawk 1, what’s your status?” The radio operator onboard *Ciara* sounded harried.

“*Ciara*, we’re looking into something that happened near your position at zero-hundred Zulu. Did you guys see anything?”

“Um... we didn’t see anything, but we were talking to a contact in Seattle when everything went dark. Since then all we’ve picked up are some AM transmissions, over.”

“Understood, *Ciara*. We’re continuing on, safe landings.”

“Likewise, Hawk 1. Ciara out.”

As the Irish ship passed overhead, the two pilots exchanged virtual glances. “You know what I said about adventure?” Tomo said. “I think I take that back.” Yomi grunted, in lieu of further reply.

The two fighters hit atmosphere a hundred miles out from the East Coast. Plasma heating created bright coronas around both vehicles, though thanks to the miracle of handwavium sensors neither craft would be blind during the descent.

~**~

Fifty miles below and a few dozen miles to the north, Sam Carsten stood on the deck of the *Remembrance* and watched two shooting stars race in parallel towards the west. A group of the off-duty crewmen had gathered nearby and were flabbling on about signs and portents. Sam just watched until the shooting stars disappeared from view, then went back below.

Korolev Air Force Base Situation Room **19 November 2016, 00:27 LST**

The air in the situation room was thick with tension. Ever since Sora had confirmed that some sort of dimensional incursion had happened right over the United States, everybody and nobody wanted to know what had happened to the planet.

"I bet that it's an invasion, the whole planet's becoming a patchwork like in TORG," Zib Stewart half-joked, watching the screens.

"Oh lord I hope not," fired back Cal Renken. "I haven't played a storm knight in forever. I don't think I remember what to do."

"Okay, we're approaching the entry window," Yomi relayed back to the base. "No sign of high-bandwidth transmissions, we're not being painted by air-defense radar or challenged by military or civilian ATC."

"Understood, Hawk Flight," Mal said, entirely too calmly. "Maintain course and heading. Scan for any transmissions."

"Roger, Korolev." A pause. "Correction, we've just been tagged by CFB Bagotville and CFB Goose Bay, both requesting to know what we're doing."

"Tell them you're on a recon mission and you're not entering Canadian airspace." Shad directed. "Anything more, tell them to ask the consulate in Ottawa."

"Gotcha, Boss, relaying now."

"Hawk 2, what do you see?"

"Not a whole hell of a lot, Korolev," Tomo's normally chipper voice was subdued. *"We're passing*

over the coast, into the Ohio valley, and the city lights are... wrong. There's not enough of them, but the pattern doesn't look like a blackout."

"Curiouser and curiouser. Yomi, you concur?"

"Yeah, Korolev, I do. I'm also picking up transmissions on the AM band, I think it's the same stuff Ciara reported."

"Can you patch us through?"

"Standby, Korolev... there, that should do it."

"President Smith says the United States want peace. They act like they want trouble. We would rather have peace, too. But if they think we can't handle trouble, they had better think again. North America is a big place. We're not all crowded together, the way they are in Europe. There's room on this continent for two great countries-maybe even for three, if the United States ever bother to recollect what they've done up in the north. If the United States think the Confederate States can't be great again, if they think we shouldn't be great again, then they had better think again about that, too."

"COCK-WRANGLING DONKEY FUCKER~!"

Everybody in the situation room jumped at the outburst. Mal Fnord's seemingly unbreakable facade had not just cracked, it had crumbled. "Hawk Flight," he said, voice hard and angry, "new orders. Switch to a search pattern and run over the major populated areas. You're looking for something on the longwave that gives us a date."

"A date?"

"Yeah, day, month and year. Especially the year. I don't care what you pull it off of - time signal, news broadcast, whatever - just get me the year!"

"Um, yessir, we'll get you the year."

Mal nodded. "Good. As for the rest of you," he said, sweeping an arm out to encompass the entire Central Committee, "set Condition One and issue a recall order for all spacecraft. We're in it deep, my comrades, and the only way out is through."

The other Soviets sat there, confused. "Ah, Mal," Kat Stewart said, "would you mind explaining what's wrong? Why are you so focused on the year? It's 2016."

"It isn't in the US," Mal replied grimly. "Not if I'm right, and I hope to hell I'm wrong but if what we just heard is real..." He trailed off.

"Then?" Kat prompted.

Before Mal could answer, Yomi broke in. "*Korolev, Hawk 1. We've got the date information that the Chairman wanted, but it's wrong. It has to be.*"

"Let me guess," Mal said, "it's not 2016?"

"*No sir, according to WPEN out of Philly it's 1940.*"

1940. The number hung in the room. Nobody dared move, or even breathe for a long moment. Finally, Shad cleared his throat and said "Allright, Hawk Flight. You've got the data Mal wanted. Time to head home, break atmo and return to the barn."

"*Er, roger that Korolev. Mind explaining what's going on?*"

"An explanation will be available soon, I think," Shad said, giving Mal a significant look.

"*Copy that. Hawk Flight out.*" The comm line pinged out as Yomi and Tomo turned around and started the long climb back to Luna.

"Damn," Mal said softly. "Damn, damn damn damn damn. *Damn.*"

"Wait," Zib said cautiously. "Was that-?"

"I think it was." Mal replied.

"Shit!"

The other Soviets looked at each other, puzzled. "Um," said Shad. "So for those of us who *don't* speak weird nationalist ranting, what's the problem?"

"I know that rant," Mal said. "I've read it before."

"You've read it?"

"Yeah, in a novel." Mal tore his eyes away from the master display – now showing Soviet forces gearing up for everything short of outright war – and looked at his comrades. "It was an alternate history," he said. "One where the Confederacy won the Slaver's Revolt and managed to stay independent all the way to the 1940s. The son of a bitch in the book who made that speech is downstairs right now. He's *real* and he's on Earth *right goddamn now.*" Mal took a deep breath. "I don't know the *how* or the *why*, but some dirty bastard's ISOTed a fascist Confederacy into our nice clean universe!"

“Holy shit,” breathed Kat.

“I thought this would be bad, but I never *imagined*...”

“Fascist rednecks?! In *my* United States?!”

“We’ve got to *do* something! We can’t let a group like that just wander around loose!”

“And what about the rest of the world?”

As the others argued, Mal felt his calm coming back. The Zen and sarcasm that had fractured in those few minutes of panic reasserted itself. “Guys, settle down,” he said. “The time for panic is over. Now it’s time for *action*.”

The Committee gave him another look. “Okay, schmott guy,” Zib said. “What do you propose?”

Mal grinned. The panic was fading fast and once again he was on the jazz. “I propose the biggest stunt we’ve ever pulled,” he replied. “We pull in popular support, the SMOFs, the rest of the Fen, as much of the rest of the world as we can get and we *hit* these redneck fucks as hard as we can. If we do this right, we might be able to stop a major war. And even if we can’t hit the sweet spot we can shorten the war and minimize casualties. There’s a lot of hurting people down there all looking for a savior. I think we might fit the bill.”

“You’ve *got* to be joking.”

“No joke. The plan’s still embryonic, but I know what to do. And we do it *right*. No shots, no playing, no whittling away at the fuckers. We line up everything carefully and shove it through their hearts in one go. And in the process we become the biggest damn heroes a sad little part of the world has *ever* seen.”

Nothing. Then, something. Elena van Oorebeek, from her post on the edge of the system with the GCU *Yuri Gagarin*: “*Well, Mal. I think I speak for all of us when I say that first, you’re a gorram lunatic with delusions of grandeur. And second, I must be a gorram lunatic with delusions of grandeur too, because I’m totally in for this. Let’s do this thing!*”

“We’ll need support.”

“Stellvia’s already called a Convention. We’ll get it there.”

“We’ll have to convince the factions they’re a serious threat, even at a WWII tech level.”

“That won’t be hard, half the SMOFs will be itching for a fight just as much as Mal.”

"We'll need diplomatic contacts with the zone; maybe we can Commodore Perry our way out of actual fighting."

And on and on it went.

Los Angeles, California

18 November 1940, xx:xx PST (Event +65 minutes)

{And now a word from our sponsor: HT POV character Chester Martin gets one of the best views in town of a steady stream of container ships entering the harbor and just sort of dropping anchor nilly-willy, since there ain't no place in a 1940 port for a 2016 container ship to unload. Hilarity ensues.} (Lets not forget the rare car carrier ship from japan. I'd love to see someone from 191 inspect one of those. "My god, it's full of cars." Thou I think they are usually met by tugs outside the port so there might be a jumble of them sitting outside the shipping channel all confused. So you could have some small little 191 frieghter coming upon them outside the port. Could always have one of these show up: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edith_Maersk) that might not even FIT in the 1940's shipping channel or the channel won't be deep enough. %D *

((Something e/se that shows up, which none of us have thought about before: international flights looking for their destination airports. Word of weirdness is going to start propagating over international ATC channels as soon as planes start having to divert somewhere -- anywhere -- else. And some may be forced to land at 191 airfields, with all that entails and implies..))

Executive Lounge, Old Ring, Stellvia

19 November 2016, 01:19 GMT (Event T+79 minutes)

Noah had spent an hour calling every Mad he could think of - the Professor, the Jason, A.C., Kohran, Sora, Shizuka... even Fred McManus and Ben Rhodes, although some of them had declined his invitation because Mal got to them first - to assemble a team that had a chance of figuring out what had happened to his homeland. Now he'd opened the sealed section of the Whole Fenspace Catalog, searched the research theology section for the ritual he needed, and got Safety and Kohran to help with the casting.

He was calling somebody else. With any luck, she'd pick up.

Just as Noah was about to tell the others to stop wasting time on a ritual that wasn't working, a thin black line appeared in the air in front of him. It opened to become a portal, through which a young woman stepped. "You called?"

"Yes, I... *You're* the Goddess of Gates and Ways?"

She sighed. "Why does everybody ask that the first time they meet me?"

"It's just... well..."

"Yes, fine, I already know what you're going to say. Consider it said and let's move on. You called?"

Noah spent a few minutes explaining what had happened. "... and I was hoping that you might know where our home went, and who's down there right now."

"Whatever happened here, it had nothing to do with me."

"But you're the Goddess of Gates..."

"...and Ways. That doesn't mean I personally open every dimensional gateway."

Noah was devastated. "I was hoping you could bring them back. My father, my brother and his family, my nephew and his wife, and my wife's family were all down there when the shift happened."

She sighed deeply. "I'm sorry. Right now, that's beyond my power. I don't even know where they are."

"Can you look?"

"I'll try, but I can't promise you anything. And I have to leave now; somebody in another worldline wants to speak with me." And she was gone.

"Thank you anyway," Noah whispered. Then he wiped away a tear and raised his voice. "Okay, people, let's get to Odyssey. We've got some high-tension thinkers to point at this mess." He stifled a yawn. "And I need to get some sleep. Assuming I *can* sleep at a time like this."

**Space Ship *Ciara*. In Earth Orbit over Central Pacific Ocean.
19 November 2016, 01:30 UTC (Event T+90 minutes)**

"Where is this?" Garret asked

"Odyssey Station, Mars orbit," Meg read the message.

Ray turned to Orla "What's our fuel?"

"Just over nine thousand. Nowhere near enough," she answered. "We're going to have to refuel to get out there,"

"Right," he nodded, "Were our stores on *Stellvia* replenished?"

"The shipment was tomorrow," Micheal Perry answered, gravely. "Which means they probably aren't going to be,"

"Milly, any luck getting a downlink signal?"

"No, everything's being overloaded by everyone else trying to do the same thing. The whole lot's just collapsing. It's like the United States isn't even there anymore,"

"What are we getting on the news,"

"The Litterbox is just as puzzled as we are," Anne answered. "Misha's still down in the server room trying to get something. Keith and Paul are on the television in the break room. They're saying the same thing... the States have gone quiet, and nobody knows why. We're not getting any television from them at all, just a few strange AM radio broadcasts. The rest of the world think's it some sort of terrorism, but they don't know what."

"Most major markets have stopped trading," Kearney said "But from what I saw on our last orbit, it was chaos down there. People were assuming it was terrorism."

"This is beyond terrorism, you don't just make a country disappear," Meg snapped him down. "And you should hear some of the weird crap we're getting. A Confederate States of America. A President Featherston who sounds like a Kentucky Fried Hitler. Not to mention music straight out of World War Two."

Milly went deadly quiet..

"When we get over Europe, everything's normal... well, as normal as possible." the comm's officer continued. Garret put his hand on her shoulder.

"And it's not just us getting this?" Paul Platowski asked, from the Pilot's chair.

"No," answered Meg.

"Anybody also notice how different the night view of the States was?" he asked. "Cloud cover's still a bit thick, but there's much less light than I remember. The power grid could have partially collapsed, and taken down US orbital internet links with it,"

"That doesn't explain the weird radio," said Orla. "If that was the case, it should be their civil defense or something,"

"We got a high particle spike on the solar radiation detectors as well," Anne said, reading from her monitor, "Fractions of a second after midnight, lasting less than half a second. It was so short the computer assumed it was an error and ignored it, but the timing is too close to be a coincidence,"

Garret sat down in his chair. "And there was my phone call that cut out at exactly midnight too," he thought for a second. "When are we next over the US?"

"About twenty-five minutes," Platowski answered. "It'll be nighttime down down there,"

"Right. I want a recording of every broadcast we can pick up from down there. Try and focus on ones featuring the Confederate States of America, or Featherston. Meg... when you've got them, I want you send them publicly, along with our radiation data, and our surface observations."

"Aye," she nodded, her voice quivering.

"Somebody might see it and be able to make heads or tails of it. Everyone else, rig the ship for landing. We have to refuel, we're going to do it somewhere safe. Plot course to land off Haulbowline,"

"Aye Captain," Platowski responded.

"Aisha should have the engine ready by then," Orla told him.

It was funny. They'd cursed their luck when that engine'd failed but if it hadn't, they would've been tied up in Seattle port and have been right in the middle of whatever happened.

Milly Jackson spent the next half-hour silently staring out a window. She had a dreadful idea about what had just happened... but that was impossible.

~***~

From: (SS Ciara, Communications), comms@roadrunner.fen
To: all-call@nation.fen
Date: 19/11/16 01:37:23 UTC
Subject: United States Incident

We were in low orbit over the United States when this occurred. Our Captain was in the middle of a phone call to Seattle, which was interrupted at exactly midnight. All ground communications with the US were lost at the same time. We picked up a momentary particle radiation surge on our solar radiation detectors fractions of a second later.

The States themselves look different from orbit. There's less light coming from the cities than there was before midnight, the whole US is much darker at night. We have some photographs.

There are no television signals that we can pick up, or FM radio. We did pick up a few AM radio broadcasts, and made a recording of these on our last pass. They talk of a Confederate States of America, a President Featherston, and some sort of Freedom rally, that sounds more like a Ku Klux Klan event than anything political. The music we picked up sounds like something from the 40's. The recordings are attached, along with the pictures.

We have to land to refuel, but we're hoping somebody could make heads or tails out of this, we're stumped.

-Meg Fitzpatrick
SS Ciara Comm's Officer

For charter or hire. Contact captain@roadrunner.fen

Attachments: [klan_freedom_rally.ogg](#), [featherston_news.ogg](#), [music.ogg](#)
[US_east_dark.png](#), [US_west_dark.png](#), [Detector_Partical_signature.xkcd](#)

~***~

Arisia Station, between Earth and Mars **19 November 2016 00:45 {or thereabouts} UTC**

“Okay, Nagaru-chan, I’m going to tell you all about how your Aunt Mikuru defeated the Vampire Queen of Phobos.” And wasn’t *that* the biggest lie Haruhi Suzumiya had ever told, in a life filled with epic-level bullshitting. Still, the way her son clapped his hands in excitement (in a manner not entirely unlike the way Mikuru would, when she got around to relaying the story later) made the huge tissue of lies seem worthwhile.

(just jotting this one down for future reference, ‘cos it’s too :3 a scene to just let wither on the vine. We open on the SOS-dan’s private quarters @ the White Tower, where Haruhi is telling the most elaborate lies about their exploits... as bedtime stories for her kid {wot’s a good name for Spawn of Suzumiya, anyway? “Nagaru,” of course - there’s nothing quite like a good causality loop.}. Then we get the news, and the usual reaction shot happens.)

~***~

Greenwood City, Greenwood Station, Earth-Luna L4
19 November, 2016 1:00 UTC

Commodore Elza Newman was already having a bad day when she received the electronic memo from her boss. It had arrived by the usual secure communications channel, and the format was correct. The authorization code was clearly forged, however, as it consisted of nothing but a certain Anglo-Saxon obscenity repeated several times.

The actual orders themselves were completely out of bounds.

Given the most recent news from Earth, however, and the results of her own hasty literature search, however, they were clearly going to have to act in some manner, and quickly.

Elza knew her employer's mind quite well, as they had worked together for more than seven years by this point in time. She was quite familiar with his political leanings, even if she might not fully agree with them. She fully agreed that what was happening down below was unacceptable. It was possible, she considered, that as an android based on a fictional character, she might not have the emotional depth to fully appreciate the nature of her employer's reaction.

It was also entirely possible, she reminded herself as she paused outside of the office's entryway and heard the sound of wordless screams, falling objects, and crashing glass from within, that her employer was quite simply unstable.

Christopher Marsden -- CEO of Greenwood Inc., the parent company of her own Greenwood Security Services -- was clearly not dealing well with the current situation.

"Ayanami-san," Elza asked as she opened the door, "Is this a bad time? I need to get clarification on the orders I just received."

The aqua-tressed girl sitting, for the moment, at the secretary's desk, took one look at the memo form Elza passed her and nodded. "You may consider the orders rescinded, Commodore," Rei said, quietly. A gesture deposited the order for the nuclear bombardment of Richmond, Virginia, Confederate States of America, in the shredder, and the now-empty hand reached for the intercom link. "Medical? The Commander is in dire need of a sedative." After a moment's pause, she added, "And I believe Commodore Newman could use a stiff drink."

(more reaction shots & initial plans from the fen go here once we start to compile & edit the finished piece.)

part the second: where culture clash isn't just the name of a band

3,000 m over the Grand Banks
19 November 2016 00:20 UTC (Event T+ 20 minutes)

The CV *Tyger Tyger* had been creeping towards the east coast of the United States for almost a half hour, and its owner was getting increasingly worried. The part-time infomorph Sabre Fang had been down in his workshop tinkering with his latest Zoid design when the autopilot went nuts on him. The sensor record showed a titanic wall of cloud forming right in front of the *Tyger Tyger*, holding steady for a solid minute, and then vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. Curious, Sabre edged his flying whale closer to where the clouds had been and started scanning for anything and everything.

What he got was a surface contact, and a large one at that, northwest of him and moving west almost as slowly as the *Tyger*. A quick thought to the sensors resolved the one large contact into a set of smaller contacts. As he examined the readings, the largest contact in the center started painting his ship.

"Huh!" he said to the empty air. Another thought hooked him directly into the radio. "This is the Fen craft *Tyger Tyger* calling unknowns on westerly heading, are you receiving, over?"

~***~

On board the USS *Remembrance*, the Y-range operator looked up from his set with surprise. "Sir! Got a contact!"

The duty officer hurried over to the station. "What've you got, Sparks?" Sparks, for his part, just looked confused.

"I'm not sure. The contact is huge, dirigible sized or more, but it's moving way too fast and headed right for us."

"A glitch?" asked the duty officer.

Sparks shook his head. "No sir, this is way too clear for a glitch."

The duty officer took one glance at the large spot on the Y-range scope, then made up his mind. He stepped to the intercom and slammed his hand down on the general quarters alarm. "General quarters, this is not a drill! All hands man battle stations!"

Sam Carsten heard the alarm and sprinted for his duty station down in the bowels of the ship. He only just managed to beat his team down. "What's up, Lieutenant?" asked {needname}.

"Something coming in," Sam said. "Don't know what."

"Goddamn Confederates," said {neednametoo}.

“No,” replied {needthisname}. “We’re too far north, it’s the limeys, gotta be.”

“Settle down, guys,” Sam said. “Get to your stations and we’ll find out soon enough.”

~***~

Detroit, Michigan

18 November 1940, 20:09 EST (Event T+ 1 hour 9 minutes)

The moment the fog lifted people started lining up on the riverbanks, just to look.

Before the fog, the city of Windsor on the other side of the river had been the impoverished country cousin of the mighty Detroit industrial complex. Now, instead of the partially-rebuilt wreckage of a city there were neat and clean glass-walled towers rising along the Canadian side of the river.

On the Canadian side, confusion was equally rampant. The skyscrapers and abandoned factories littering Detroit had been replaced with smaller towers and operational factories lighting the night sky with activity. People gathered together in the November cold, standing on the bank, taking photographs and talking in low voices about what the hell was going on.

Eventually, somebody on both sides noticed that the Ambassador Bridge connecting the two cities was still there, a fact noted with even more confusion in Detroit, since there had never *been* a bridge between the two cities as far as they knew. The crowds started drifting towards the bridge, and milled around on either side as American and Canadian debated on what to do next.

Peter J. Cropes, sophomore at the University of Windsor and already annoyed that the party he was heading to in Detroit had been canceled by act of *somebody*, became the first person to make contact with the brave new world waiting on the other side of the river. Peter had been delayed when the fog shut down the bridge, and now his Pontiac cautiously made its way along, followed not far behind by dozens of other cars and pedestrians.

On the Detroit side, the small cordon of policemen who'd been called out to try and maintain order watched as an automobile that looked simultaneously like a ratty piece of garbage and more advanced than something out of a Flash Gordon serial trundled down the mystery bridge and stopped right in front of them. Out climbed a young man in workingman's clothes, who gave the cops, the crowd and the entire city a very puzzled look.

“Uh, hi,” he said. “We come in peace?”

USS Remembrance Task Force, Atlantic Ocean

19 November 2016, 01:13 UTC (Event T+ 1.25 hours)

To say that the task force was surprised when a seven hundred foot whale came diving out of the sky, circled around the task force and then swung back up to hang in the air in a way that no whale should ever hang would be a drastic understatement. Based on the size of the Y-range return, they had been expecting a swarm of bombers, probably British, hell-bent on destroying the *Remembrance* and all who sailed in her.

Sabre, for his part, was equally surprised to find a flotilla of museum pieces steaming along like they were on just another patrol voyage. "It's like *The Final Countdown*, only in reverse," he muttered as he commanded the cameras to record everything. "Well," he said after a minute, "might as well try talking to them again." He hooked up to the Internet to google up antique naval radio frequencies, grumbled as the Internet connection failed to work properly, then mentally shrugged and tried something on the lower edge of the military frequency bands.

By this time, the only people above decks who were not staring at the massive shape hanging over the fleet were the wireless operators. The man onboard the *Remembrance*, who was trying to contact a shore station, broke off as an unknown transmitter interrupted his work.

"This is the CV *Tyger Tyger* calling unidentified warships, please respond, over." The operator sat there slack-jawed, unable to answer. "This is the CV *Tyger Tyger* calling unidentified warships, please respond, over."

~***~

* Something similar should happen down south, only it's the Mexican Air Force investigating what happened to Juarez & coming into Los Estaditos Confederatos. Much lulz are to be had. Minimal Wiki research indicates that the Mexican Air Force is MOSTLY Cessnas, VIP Aircraft and Transports. They have 8 fighter jets and most of the "combat" craft are Helicopters. Yeah, and? Choppers work - hell, they work damn well since 1940 pretty much nobody had ever seen a helicopter, much less the sort of heavy things modern militaries like. So Lt. *doesn't want to embarrass himself making a bad name* overflies in like, a Bell recon chopper? Something like, yeah. Don't really have a scene blocked out in my head for it. Hm, perhaps this can be from the POV of one of Turtledove's "Libertad" Confederates? 's what little thoughts I had about the subject tended towards. Do we want a certain minor aide to a 191-German officer to be in the IZ or would he have been back in Germany LONG before this? He'd have been back in Germany years ago; let's not get silly. Well, too silly.

* Low-level Fen interventions start happening; I'm thinking Firv & ECS's thing with the Greenwood troops and F trying to calm down confused & panicky 191 tank crews. Other stuff TBD.

* Something 'Daneside, maybe multiple things 'Daneside, as the rest of the world tries to process what just happened.

**Space Ship Ciara. Four miles outside Cork Harbour
19 November 2016, 02:09 UTC (Event T+129 minutes)**

Re-entry passed without incident. The Ciara blazed a trail through the atmosphere, before angling down to an always rough landing in the North Atlantic.

Milly brought the main transceivers back up, re-connecting to the orbital interwave nodes. She expected maybe a few replies to their all-call email to come through. Three seconds after hooking in to the nodes, all three servers had been DDoS'd into the ground. It seemed like the whole of Fenspace was trying to connect right to them, and the servers just couldn't handle the load. The whole lot just came to a grinding halt.

"Fuck," she swore.

Not even able to use a virtual terminal on the machines, Milly just pulled the network connection and waited for things to settle down. The tech took a deep breath,

Misha looked at her. "This is big," the catgirl said.

"You don't think," Milly snarked back. "A terrorist attack on the United States big enough to bring most of their infrastructure down... and we happened to be right above it when it happened,"

"I wish I'd been able to tell the Soviets more," Misha said.

"They probably know more than we do at this stage if they were launching those fighters,"

"The Stellvians knew enough to call a Convention after only a few minutes," a pause to think, "They called it so fast, they've got to know what happened and how serious it was,"

Jackson nodded. "Maybe they caused it? Another kaboomite."

"Huh?"

"Before your time. A Stellvian researcher mucking around with stuff called Kaboomite caused a lot of damage at Islandcon."

A pause.

"They can't have blown up an entire continent. We'd've seen a blast that big."

Good point Misha. And probably have been caught in it too. And planet Earth would likely be spinning out of control.

“Okay Misha, it's not an explosion I know. Then what? Let's lay this out. Captain's on the horn with a contact in Seattle. The line dies at exactly midnight. At the same time, I lose my connection to US groundlinks, and we get that massive particle burst. All normal radio traffic from the State's stops, but everything else is OK... it's like the US just isn't there anymore.”

Misha nodded, thinking.

“Now, we come around the block again and we pick up these AM radio transmissions.” She started to chew on a pen. “And only AM radio from CONUS. Nothing else. The radio we're getting, we get a man named Featherston preaching like a Nazi is a president of the Confederate States of America...” She knew she'd heard the name Featherston before. “And what else we get sounds like it dates back to the 40's”

“Maybe the US got replaced by this Confederate States somehow,” Misha said, simply.

“Yeah, but how the hell could they replace an entire *country*? It's just not possible,”

“We're on a spaceship made out of a sea-ship, powered by handwavium, that travels through space at a tenth the speed of light. And I'm a catgirl.”

Good point Misha. Again.

“Alright alright... so the US got chopped out somehow. What's replaced it? A Confederate States of America, ruled by some English-speaking fascist. An America where the CSA won the Civil War somehow and took over. And if they're at a 1940's level... then that'd explain why we're not getting any internet from them, and why the continent is so dark. They're missing seventy years of urban development,”

Misha nodded, showing she was still listening. Milly was feeling sick to her stomach.

“It sounds like a big version of that interdimensional incident three years ago... only instead of people... a country got sent instead. If one thing's been a constant of Fenspace, if somebody can do something small-scale, you bet someone'll do it ten times bigger just because... and since that started on Stellvia, maybe they figured out how to detect them. We got that particle burst... which our detectors just called a radiation burst, maybe they could see that it was the radiation that comes from one of these dimensional whizz-bangs, and reacted to it.”

“So, The 'danelaw United States got replaced with an alternate universe version where the Confederate States annihilated them a hundred and fifty years ago and took over. And they're

seventy years behind us in technology.” Misha summed up.

“And the people who were in the US... probably..” Milly swallowed a lump, “Went wherever the hell this CSA came from, because that’s how these things usually work on TV” a beat. “Makes sense”.

“Yup,” the catgirl nodded.

A silent pause, broken only by the server fans and the clatter of the ship’s engines.

“My family was in Detroit,” Milly whispered.

“Maybe we should tell the Captain,” Misha changed the subject.

“Yeah. I’ll tell him.”

~***~

Garret listened to Milly speak. He took it all in and thought for a moment. Then remembered that he was the Captain of a spaceship powered by dead dinosaurs and miracle goo. And his XO was a catgirl, busy trying to organise a fuel tanker over the radio.

“Makes sense then,” he said. That was the worst part of it. “And I’m sure your parents are okay Milly.” He tried his best to sound reassuring.

“Thanks” the voice on the other end of the link said, “Uh... there’s one more thing. I know I’ve heard the name Featherston before... but I don’t know where. “

“Right. Concentrate on getting our interwave links working again. Chances are a thousand people are out there know, and are just trying to tell us all at once.”

“Aye... I’ll try. “

“Good. Then for God’s sakes get some sleep,”

“Aye,”

Garret heard the yawn before she hung up. He placed the headset back on it’s holder, before staring out at the lights of Cork City and Haulbowline island in front of him. Actually a Naval base, it was one of the few places he knew that could handle the Ciara quickly, that wouldn’t have been swamped by Fendanes diving for ground or be overflowing mundane gawkers wondering if they knew anything.

“Not good news?” Platowski questioned from the pilot’s seat.

“I don’t know,”

“Then what?”

Meg’s voice was tired, with a worried quiver.

“I’m not sure you’ll believe th...” he stopped himself. Anne’s ears pricked up. “Alright,” he reached for the mic again, and keyed it open to the entire ship’s intercom, “This is the Captain.” He still hated these. “You all know that something has happened in the United States, and that an emergency convention has been called. Well, I think we’ve figured this out.... “ a deep breath, “Somehow, the United States has been swapped out for an alternate Confederate States of America, from another universe. One that’s about seventy years behind our tech.”

Meg just gasped.

Anne sighed to herself. “Makes sense nyaa~”

~***~

Micheal Perry stood in the break room looking up at the speaker, before looking down at his ‘Chief Mate’ shoulder patch.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered

Touji, busy trying to fix the cooker, looked up at him. “Wonder what’s on TV about it,”

They turned it on. Nothing over freeview, RTE were on closedown, and only broadcasting music and cheap decade-old programs that weren’t worth watching. Nobody else broadcast over the air.

~***~

The ship slipped into dock. It was just a routine action. Aisha and Orla began to shut down the main engines and switched the generators to match a change in demand.

“Take first watch Aisha,” Ordered Orla,

“I’ll get my Red Bull while I’m at it,” the catgirl smirked, baring her teeth, “That’ll keep me going all night,”

Orla didn’t doubt it. Sometime she was even jealous of the pair. Then she remembered how she

got the Chief Engineer's patch, and hurried out of the compartment.

On the deck, deckhand Keith McSharry was timing his jump across onto the dock to catch the mooring lines. He felt the engines shut down beneath his feet, the ship now coasting into dock. Electric bow thrusters whined, white water bubbling up between grey hull and stone quay.

One. Swallow a lump. Two. Take a deep breath. Three... and Go!

He felt himself hang in the air for a few moments, before landing awkwardly on flaking concrete. He stumbled forward, throwing his arms out to catch himself. Instead, he hit the ground, gravel biting at his knees and elbows.

The deckhand pushed himself to his feet quickly.

"Alright Danjoe, throw the line!" he called back to the ship.

His fellow deckhand tossed a heavy hawser down to him. He caught it, nearly being knocked off his feet for a second time. Quickly, he looped it over a bollard and signalled for the line to be pulled tight with the capstan. Then he ran astern, catching the second line. Loop it, signal for it to be pulled tight, then onto the third. Loop it over a bollard, let it pull tight. Then don't run into Kev who's after doing the exact same thing in the other direction.

"Easy as usual," he said.

"No problemo," Keith shrugged, showing his skinned elbows.

Ciara's generators were still running, the ship fully lit up. The apartments at the end of the island were dark, as could be expected at this hour in the morning. Odd, the Naval base was lit up like a Christmas Tree. Ciara's older sister, *L.E. Órla* sat opposite her on the other side of the dock, getting ready to get underway.

The whole Navy side of the island was buzzing... if it was possible for the Irish Navy to buzz. Keith saw the BP tanker truck waiting for them. Great. Then the official looking blacked out Honda Accord, from which a man in a grey suit had just gotten out of.

He was carrying a large brown envelope, and was making a beeline right for them.

"Oh," he said faintly, "That's never good."

Well, it was the Captain's problem. He was glad he was just a deckhand. He heard a clatter from the deck. Anne had jumped down from the bridge, landing cat-like on all fours. The catgirl vaulted the rail and landed on the dock, startling the suit. Calmly, she started to jog towards the tanker..

"Hey wait!" the suit called after her.

She stopped dead.

"I'm from the Department of Foreign affairs. I need to see the Captain,"

The man was obviously intimidated by her... she could smell it. And she could see him shaking. 'Danes and biomods. She reached for her walkie-talkie.

"Captain, Captain. We have a problem. There's someone here from the government to see you, nyaa~"

"Right, Right. I'll be down to the dockside in a minute. I'll meet him there,"

She could hear how tired he was,

"Y'know... maybe you might want to get a catgirl mod, you'd be able to handle late nights better," she chuckled.

"Hah! My wife'd kill me,"

"I'm sure Meg'd go with you." she purred, "Nyaaa~"

"I'll be there in a minute. Just get the fuel loaded. And ask Micheal if he can find some food somewhere,"

"Right, alright." Spoilsport.

~***~

Garret fixed his cap and Captain's jacket, doing his best to give off the impression of a true Space Captain. He stepped down the gangplank.

"Captain Garret," the man offered his hand, "We meet again, though I wish it were under better circumstances,"

"Mister Hall," Garret shook it. "I'm guessing this is over what happened to the States."

"Yes," Hall nodded. "You remember what we discussed last year,"

"I do," Garret fought down a momentary knot of discomfort. "Why?"

"We know the convention's been called. The Union is already preparing to send a delegation. I want you to be the representative of the Irish Government on that delegation."

Garret felt like he'd been shot... even though he'd been expecting the bullet.

"What?"

"We need someone who knows Fenspace, who better than someone who lives there?" He offered the Captain the folder. "Your diplomatic credentials, Ambassador."

Raymond Garret looked at the folder like it contained his death warrant.

"There's got to be someone better than me for this man..."

Hall shrugged his shoulder. "Like I said, you're familiar with Fenspace. And Fenspace is reasonably familiar with you. You and your crew might not be famous as such, but you would still be well thought of, especially for your war record."

Garret groaned. It made sense alright. Maybe it was a better approach than sending a stuffy diplomat who just didn't get it... who didn't know the culture and didn't understand that green foods weren't to be eaten.

"Alright, I'll do it

"Good. Now the second matter. Your ship is the first European fen ship to land after the dropout, and the only one we're certain is going back up. So, the German, Italian, French, Spanish, Greek, Polish..." he paused to think ..." Belgian and Danish ambassadors making up the EU delegation will be travelling with you,"

"We don't have the space aboard,"

"They're travelling light. And naturally, we'll pay your charter fees, along with a generous bonus for being such a rush job."

Ever feel like a lamb being herded towards the slaughter?

"I still think you might be better off getting one of the Irish feddies," he said "They actually do this sort of thing. I think the Captain of the USS O'Brien is from Kilkenny,"

"None of them are down here," the diplomat stated, "And neither can we contact them quickly. You're our man,"

Garret felt as uncomfortable with it as he looked. So... essentially, right from being a freighter

Captain, to a high-ranking diplomat. Well, if Captain Picard could do it, he sure could do his best to figure out.

“What do I have to do, then?”

“Represent the State’s interests, and negotiate on behalf of the State in accordance with the guidelines in the dossier.”

“Alright, alright. “ He exhaled a long, deep breath. “When are they arriving?”

“When are you departing?”

“Two hours, after we’ve refueled.”

“They’ll be arriving by helicopter before then. Be ready for them. Goodbye and godspeed... Ambassador.”

Ray was just grimly quiet. Sitting right above the US when the dropout happened, and now about to be sitting right in the middle of the political mess that followed.

He wondered which God to curse for this turn of fate.

He made it known to the crew, who were as thrilled as he was. Yes, we’re getting paid quite a bit to do this. Yes, it is unusually fast for an EU mission, but they know how fast Fenspace moves, and the delegation was made up based on what ambassadors were available. No, we do not all get diplomatic immunity. Yes, this does mean we’ll probably get a priority dock.

“God help us, I think we might just have become important in this.”

Anne was right, Garret thought. He’d spent the last six years doing his best to keep from being in the middle of things like this. Notoriety, he’d always felt, was a good way to get people killed. He sighed, looking at that bulkhead in the break room that’d been covered with photographs.

Including one framed, taken on their first arrival into Port Phobos.

Of course, that didn’t stop people getting killed either. Some of the pictures on that bulkhead proved as much.

Feeling achingly tired, he desperately needed some sleep. But the roar of a landing chopper denied him.

~***~

Illuminated only by the glow of their computer screens, Milly and Misha dived through the torrent of information the ship had been flooded with. They felt the engines start up beneath them, the ship shuddering to life once more.

Milly knew she'd seen the name before, but just could not place it.

She checked the clock. The sun was near coming up outside, but still she kept working... having stolen some of Aisha's Red Bull. The catgirl engineer would be pissed... but needs must, and she needed to stay awake.

Misha was doing her damndest to keep things from collapsing again. The mundane web was gone... anyone who was awake was scrambling to find information on what had happened in the States. Since most of the major web infrastructure was in the US... even despite the inherent fault tolerance of the network, what was left of the web had just gone belly up under the load.

The engines revved up, pushing the ship out to sea at what felt like top speed.

"They're in a hurry," Misha commented.

"Trying to get there by midday," Milly didn't even look up from her screen.

As if to put a full stop on it, Anne's voice came over the intercom.

"Rig ship for takeoff. Secure all stations,"

Milly just reached over and pushed the button to signal they were ready. Misha looked perplexed... she hadn't even checked... but didn't doubt her. They just kept working, bracing themselves as the engines revved up to full power. The deckplates vibrated under their feet as the ship launched forward in the ocean.

Misha braced herself against the server rack as the ship pitched nose up. Featherston, Featherston... is anybody talking about Featherston. Is anybody talking to us? All the mail was on 'all-call'... at a guess, maybe a thousand messages a second as everyone trialed their pet theory.

Someone out by Jupiter thought it was the US pulling the plug on the web because they were dicks like that. Some thought he was a dick. Someone else thought it was Al Qaeda. Someone thought he was a cockless moron. Another blamed it all on random chance because, y'know, cockup before conspiracy. Others were pointing to the speed which the Soviets and Stellvians had reacted, and assumed they'd been involved somehow. Screaming tourists, desperate for a way home mingled with people asking questions about loved ones, and wondering just what the hell had happened to the USS Enterprise. Somebody else had mentioned the particle surge...

others had also picked up on the radio dropout. Nobody seemed to be mentioning Featherston.

And these messages where hours old, just clearing backlogs.

Maybe their own message had just been swamped in the crowd?

Just one voice in a very loud crowd.

More came in, some messages older, some newer. It was haphazard... almost out of control. The ship's own servers were doing their damndest to keep up, only receiving about half of what they were sent. Older unreceived or corrupted stuff would be re-requested, re-sent, then re-lost in the digital blackhole to be requested again.

A hundred times a hundred other ships who'd never bothered to wave their computer systems, were having the exact same problem, dragging everyone else down.

Only use the bare-minimum of handwaving to get things working, that's how it had been explained to her. It was three years later, and she still didn't quite get it. It sure hadn't stopped her from accidentally modding herself to look like Anri from Bubblegum Crisis...thanks to someone putting black handwavium in a coke bottle... so there wasn't a safety issue to it. Ciara's crew just didn't wave things if they could help it.

"We're not settling into orbit," Misha commented. "They throttled back, but they're still pushing it harder than normal. I guess we're doing about point-one C."

"You can tell?"

"Yup," she wiggled her ears.

"Well, that is fast...for.." She just trailed off as her shell script turned up a few matches.

"I know, we're really motoring now..." a beat. "Find something?"

Milly nodded... she was too busy reading. When she was done, she sat back in the chair and took a long, deep, centring breath, closed her eyes... the read it again. Well, that makes for a nice bit of icing on the cake.

"We're going to have to talk to the Captain on this one... again."

~***~

Vulpine Fury's Puppet Works, Kandor, Luna
19 November 2016, 08:13 LST (Event T + 8 hours)

Eljay groggily made his way to the kitchen after taking care of his morning ablutions, to find his sister looking incredibly lost as a talking head on *Good Morning, Luna* seemed to be going on about “seemingly impossible” this and “the energy required would be massive” that.

“Jen?” He asked. “What’s wrong?”

Before she could answer, the news broke from the talking head to a copy of an AM broadcast, with the legend “Courtesy of SS *Ciara*” It had the scratchy, low quality hiss he associated with old recordings of radio serials like *The Shadow*, or quotes from World War Two.

“My name is Jake Featherston, and I’m here to tell you the Truth.” The working class Virginia drawl and the contents of the speech made Eljay’s blood run cold. He sat down mechanically and watched the broadcast until it returned to the point of coverage he walked in on. He absently noted the text scroll across the bottom.

“What’s that mean?” Jen asked. ““An Emergency Convention has been called?””

“It means trouble, sis,” he said, blinking tears from his eyes. He took a calming breath. “You and Braden are welcome to stay here at the Workshop for the duration, or until we can get you your own place. I’ll see about getting Braden into school here while I’m out.” He went to go change into something slightly more formal before heading to the Watchtower.

~***~

Space Ship *Ciara*. Between Earth and Space Station *Odyssey*

19 November 2016, 08:37 UTC {Note: Early morning, between 6 and 9 - ish}

Halfway to *Odyssey*, and Ray had finally managed to get the other diplomats into his cabin for a friendly chat. They were chafing at the close quarters, being used to travelling in opulent Mercedes limousines, and government jets. But, it was only for a few hours, and if they really didn’t like it, they could get out and push.

“Alright,” he started with his favourite word. “I’ve asked you here because I thought I could fill you all in on what’s actually happening. Now, what do you know so far?”

Georg Lusser, Ambassador for Germany, spoke first.

“We know that all communication has been lost with the United States. Neither civilian, nor military links are operable. Canada and Mexico appear to still be intact,”

“Our embassy in Canada is still responding on shortwave,” Henri Dewoitine, Ambassador of France cut in. “They have no idea what has happened. One moment they were there, one moment not.”

His accent was thick enough that Ray had a hell of a time figuring out what he was saying.

"Same for us," the Italian Ambassador added in. Her name was, if Garret recalled right, was Marie Morricone.

"The Spanish embassy in Cuba went down at the same time," Manuel Adaro said calmly. "Though, it has not spread down to Mexico City. We've been trying to get information from them, but most communication links with South America ran through the US. Everything else is overloaded."

A silence, the other ambassadors looked at each other.

"I think that may be it." Anders Rasmussen of Denmark said calmly. "None of us," he looked at his Belgian, Greek and Polish colleagues, "Can add to this, I do not think."

Garret nodded. "Well, here's what we know. We were in orbit at the time of the dropout. I was on the phone with someone in Seattle at the time. We lost our connections, the same as you. FM radio, television, even cellular. Anyways, we also picked up a radiation burst from the surface at the same time, on these detectors we have to warn us of solar flares. "

The Ambassadors threw each other unsettled glances. What could cause a burst of radiation, but a nuclear weapon? A high altitude airburst? That theory ignored the fact that the ship they were sitting on, would've been incinerated by just such a blast.

"Now, this is where it gets interesting. We looked down, and the normal glow from metropolitan areas was dimmed a great deal, not gone entirely, just dimmed. We're still picking up some radio transmissions from the United States," he didn't say 'former', "I think I have one recorded here," He pushed play on the laptop's keypad.

"We're on the way! The Freedom Party is on the way, on the way to Richmond. The Confederate States are on the way, on the way back. And the white race is on the way, on the way toward settling accounts with the blacks who stabbed us in the back and prevented us from winning the war. And you all know that -- we should have won the war!"

"Stab in back. We should have won the war." murmured Georg. "He even sounds like *him*, if he were from America,"

Everyone looked at him.

"Well, we think that one's a broadcasted recording. There's more like it, but that's the best one we have, that's the one that shows what we're dealing with,"

The French ambassador glared "Is this some Fennish bullshit? Could it be a hoax."

"If it is, it's a hoax on us too," Garret shot back. "We're only guessing at what happened here, but we have something that fits the facts."

"Let Mister Garret speak, Mister Dewotine," the Belgian said quietly. Garret had forgotten her name, but she had really nice brown hair. "I'd like to hear this entirely, before making any judgement"

"Thanks. That's all that's coming up from the United States, that we picked up. We also got some music from the same stations. It sounds like something from the 1940's."

He played a sample that wasn't identified, but sounded a little bit like Vera Lynn, if she was from Florida.

"Now we get into a bit of Fenspace history. About three years ago, during the war, there was an incident. Travellers from... well another dimension arrived and they caused something of a fuss. Eventually, they left again, on to another universe. Now, this all started at Stellvia, and they were heavily involved in the whole thing."

"And it was these Stellvians who called the convention," Georg finished it.

Garret nodded, a little surprised that nobody questioned the whole travellers from another dimension thing. "It's a reasonable guess then, that they have some way of detecting these sort of things. They called a Convention when we were still figuring out that something had happened, and we were right above the US when it did."

"So maybe they caused it?" Marie theorised, "And they're just calling us up here to make their demands to our face. Bow down before Fenspace, or we knock out your power from orbit."

Ray wanted to facepalm.

"I don't mean to impugn your honesty Mister Garret, but maybe the wool's been pulled over your eyes too. As I recall, you're a freighter Captain, one of many, with few if any connections to Fenspace politics. My aide described your reputation in Fenspace as 'Ciara Who?... Oh, those Irish guys.' They know the filk about the ambush, more than they know who it's about."

"We trade with Stellvians regularly," he tried to hid his annoyance. "And take charters from them. They wouldn't do that. It's bad for business."

"Yes, but nation..."

"Have you ever actually been to Fenspace?" he snapped her down hard enough to startle the others. Well good, because he was bloody tired, and bloody annoyed. "I've lived up here for the

last six years, I know who and what I'm talking about"

"Perhaps you should continue," Georg nudged him back on track. He wanted to hear more.

"Right, Right," Garret held back on a yawn. "I'm sorry I'm losing my temper, it's been a long night and I'm tired. Now where was I?" a pause. "Okay, The Stellvians have some way of detecting these interdimensional shifts, and they called this convention very, very quickly. Now we picked up a burst of particle radiation... we can't tell what kind. I'd bet money the Stellvians can, and that they recognised it as the kind given off by an interdimensional shift,"

He stopped for a second, and let them catch up. Here goes.

"What we think has happened, is that the continental United States has somehow been swapped out with a version where the Confederate States of America won the American Civil War. More specifically, " he checked his notes, "The version from Harry Turtledove's Timeline-191 series of novels. The reason for the failure of communications, is because they are about seventy years behind us in technology. That also explains the darker night-view... there's less industrialisation and urbanisation down there now, along with the changes in radio programming. "

Silence.

A God awful silence.

"Makes Sense," Piotrek Juspescyk of Poland, said to himself. Everyone stared at him for a moment. "We're on a bloody spaceship," he stated.

"Good point." Kókkino Poukámiso, of Greece, nodded.

They all had to agree.

~***~

Emerson, Manitoba

19 November 2016, 10:03 CDT (Event T+15 hours)

Constable William MacGregor, RCMP had seen strange days before; living on the American border pretty much guaranteed that. Today was proving to be one of the stranger ones, though. The storm last night - unseasonable weather that, fog and lightning this late in fall? - had cut off communications on the other side of the border, and MacGregor had spent most of the morning reassuring worried locals that something was being done and phones to friends and relations in Minnesota would be restored Real Soon Now.

Privately, he was more worried than he let on. Nobody had said anything officially - yet - but from things he'd heard back at the detachment the problem wasn't confined to just the Emerson area. Even the CBC was on the case, claiming that strange things were afoot down in Michigan.

He'd asked the superintendent about the reports. "Sir, what's really going on? Did the Americans blow themselves up? Zombies? I need to tell the people something."

The superintendent just looked grim. "Keep telling them that the problem will be resolved." He said it with authority that William suspected was lacking.

"Sir, I don't think this is a problem we *can* resolve."

"The problem will be resolved." And that was that.

So William was out on Emerson's main drag, directing traffic and trying to soothe troubled waters, when a convoy of trucks carrying a dozen tanks straight out of a World War Two movie came trundling up the road.

~***~

Captain Jed Eckert for his part was just plain confused. This wasn't the first time he'd taken a barrel squadron up from the barracks in Grand Forks to reinforce the garrison in Winnipeg. He knew he was running late - the weird weather last night had convinced him not to cross until morning - but with the way the chucklefucks in Winnipeg ran the garrison a couple hours' delay wouldn't have meant much.

And then things went straight to a very confusing hell. Just over the line from Dakota, the narrow blacktop road he and his crew had expected vanished, fading away not fifty feet into Canadian territory and replaced by a wide stretch of concrete. And right in front of that...

~***~

Point of Entry, Manitoba Rt 75

"Morning, Fred."

"Morning, Wanda."

"How're things?"

"It's been quiet. All that fog last night, I guess nobody wanted to be on the road."

"I can imagine. But hey, looks like business is picking up, there's a whole lot of trucks coming up

the road.”

“Big suckers, aren’t they? And are those *tanks*?”

“Doesn’t look like they’re slowing down.... oh shit!”

~***~

“What the hell was that?” Eckert demanded.

“Looked like a toll booth, sir,” his driver replied.

“Who in the hell would put a toll booth on the road into Canada? The Canucks don’t have the money to spend on cars, much less tolls.”

“Well, sir,” said the driver, “I’d guess that they’re the same ones who built the highway.” He pointed towards the road, and Eckert watched a sign reading ‘WELCOME TO THE LORD SELKIRK HIGHWAY’ roll by.

“Let’s get off the road and start figuring things out. Where’s the nearest town?”

“If I’m reading these signs right, we’re just outside Emerson.”

“*Emerson*?” Now Eckert was even more confused. He’d been through Emerson on his last run to the United States for equipment; the town had been an early casualty in the Great War, and nobody had bothered returning to rebuild. All that was left of Emerson was a few ruins and a signpost.

Still...

“All right, Sergeant, let’s head into Emerson and try to sort this thing out.”

~***~

The convoy - and what else could you call it? - rolled up the town’s main street and stopped, right there in the middle of the road. All over the trucks men in greenish uniforms swarmed, all of them looking puzzled, some of them fingering rifles like they expected to be attacked any second.

William MacGregor noted with relief that the civvies were giving the convoy a wide berth. The combination of *military* and *nervous* was never a good thing, and the good citizens of Emerson had picked up on that fact. Still, there were at least twenty people hovering around the edges of the road with cameras and cameraphones.

Having decided that the soldiers weren't going to start shooting up the place - yet - MacGregor ambled up to the lead truck as casually as possible, arms to his sides and vary carefully not looking like he was reaching for a weapon.

"Hello, there. Is there a problem?" MacGregor did his best to remain polite.

The man in the passenger seat - his uniform screamed *officer* to MacGregor, jumped a little. He blinked rapidly, then focused on the constable as a life preserver in the middle of a storm. "Yes," he said. "We seem to be... lost. Is this the road to Winnipeg?"

"It sure is," MacGregor said. "Just on down the highway." He looked at the collection of men and machines. "You fellows some sort of reenactment group?"

"Reenactment... group?" The officer seemed faint, though MacGregor couldn't tell why.

"Well, yeah, one of those things where people dress up in uniforms and play-act out battles. Is the Naval Museum doing something?"

~***~

At this point, Jed Eckert was just about to throw down his sidearm and run screaming off into the prairie. Here he was, supposed to bring a barrel platoon up from Grand Forks to Winnipeg, and now he was in a town that shouldn't exist, surrounded by strangely-dressed Canucks and cars that looked like somebody left them in the oven too long, while this garrulous policeman flabbled on about *people dressing up as soldiers*. It was enough to try the patience of the strongest men.

Jed Eckert wasn't one of the strongest men. "Listen," he snapped, "I am Captain Jedidiah Eckert of the United States Army, and I want you to tell me straight *what the fuck* is going on here!"

The policeman looked taken aback. "Captain," he said slowly, "there's no need to get rude. All I was wondering was why you were taking a dozen tanks to Winnipeg."

"To reinforce the troops stationed there." Eckert said it automatically. The policeman looked even more puzzled.

"Troops? There haven't been any troops stationed in Winnipeg since the base closed in '04."

Jed blinked. "There were US troops in Winnipeg in 1904?"

"1904? The base closed in 2004."

"*What!?*" Jed and the policeman looked at the driver, who had blurted - more squeaked - the

word out. Though truth to tell, Jed Eckert could sympathize.

"Ah, officer-"

"Constable."

"Right, yes, Constable, sorry. Constable... I think we should finish this conversation somewhere else. And get my men off the street before something gets wrong."

"I, um. Yes. Yes, that's a very good idea."

~***~

Within twenty minutes of MacGregor and Eckert's conversation, a video was posted to [youtube.ca](https://www.youtube.ca) titled 'US INVADES CANADA!!!'

Predictably, all hell broke loose.

(intro F, GSS and the Canadian response!)

~***~

OGJ Liason Offices, Kandor City, Luna
19 November 2016, 16:00 LST. (Event T+16 hours)

The door to the tiny conference room in the OGJ offices in Kandor slid open at Arthur's approach with a slight hiss.

"So I finally got a straight answer out of CHQ," Arthur said, dropping in to a chair opposite F.

F looked up from the PADD where he was watching the video of the American transport column entering Emerson, again. "You don't sound too happy about that," he observed.

"Yes, well, they've gotten Herself sufficiently tranquilized that she's able to speak intelligible Japanese again. Which means that she's issuing orders again," Arthur said and shuddered involuntarily.

F winced in sympathy before gathering his courage and asking, "So what are our orders?"

"For now, nothing's changed. CHQ is being sufficiently contradictory that we can ignore most of what she's saying," Arthur said. He sighed and raised a hand to toy absently with the short braids at the back of his head. "The Canadian government is still requesting military and diplomatic assistance to deal with the situation in Emerson. And yes, Greenwood's people are

on their way. The most intelligent thing that CHQ's said so far is that we're supposed to send a small group to reinforce them and the Canucks."

Arthur dropped his hand and reached out for the PADD. Plucking it from F's hand he raised an eyebrow. "You know this is an exaggeration."

"I know, I know," F said. He waved his hand in a vague gesture of dismissal. "I was checking with Andy and we don't have too much in the way of ground forces in Cis-Lunar space right now. There's a TO&E if you swap away from the video."

Manipulating the PADD's interface Arthur read through the short list. His expression had improved a little by the time he reached the end and he began making notes on the PADD. "We don't need much. We can lean on New Yavin for some storm troopers, maybe borrow a few people from the League. And there's a Trekkie transport docked at John Henry..."

F excused himself from the small room while Arthur worked and wandered down the short hall to the communications office where Andy, Arthur's assistant was working. Poking his head in he waited a moment for Andy to notice him. "I'm getting a coffee," F said. "You want anything?"

"No thanks. 120 volts AC is fine," Andy said, one hand twitching the power cord connecting him to the wall socket.

A couple more of his hands shuffled some memory sticks around before finding the correct one. "Here, this just came in for Arthur," he said, holding the stick out.

F accepted the small device and with a wave to a mostly distracted Andy made the short trip to the coffee maker before heading back to the conference room. He set one cup down in front of Arthur and placed the memory stick beside it. Arthur slotted it into the PADD and began reading the message. He sighed and offered the PADD to F.

"Looks like we've gotten another request from the Canadians. They want some people to help advise them so I'm supposed to send a group to Ottawa too."

Arthur fixed F with a look. "You're going to take the group to Emerson, make sure they're settled and pass off command to the Greenwood people and the Canadians. Then you're going to join your partner in Ottawa."

F choked on his coffee. "Me, I'm only an OF-5!"

"Yeah, well, you work well with the 'danese and you're a Canuck yourself," said Arthur.

"No I don't! Grey just draws all the attention on herself," F sputtered.

He stopped in mid bluster, a look of tired resignation in his eyes. "I suppose I should be grateful you're sending Grey directly to Ottawa."

F glared at Arthur. "Someday you're going to tell me exactly what it was I did to you."

Arthur smiled demurely. "Sore wa himitsu desu."

He stood, and took F by the arm, leading him out of the door. "Come on, we've got some orders for Andy to transmit and you'll need to swing by A Baoa Qu on your way. I think I can convince an old friend to loan us a Mobile Suit."

All over North America

19 November, 18:00 UTC (Event T+ 18 hours)

Without warning, all wireless stations within the United and Confederate States broke off with a squeal of static, and a deep, toneless voice filled the airwaves:

"THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE MYSTERONS."

"Where the hell is that coming from!?" Confederate propaganda master Saul Goodman yelled at his engineers.

"We don't know, Mr. Goodman, but whatever it is, it's jamming all of our frequencies!"

"Well, for God's sake *fix it!*"

"We're trying, Mr. Goodman! We're trying!"

"WE KNOW THAT YOU CAN HEAR US, EARTHMEN."

"Do we know who's responsible for this?"

"No sir, all we know is that it's taken over all of our wireless communications, civilian and military."

"Sir, reports are coming in from all over the country, the same thing is happening."

"OUR WILL IS SLOW, BUT NONETHELESS EFFECTIVE."

In Ottawa, stunned silence met the announcement. The radio in the conference room nestled within the Centre Block on Parliament Hill had been tuned to an AM station out of New York State, trying to get some idea of just what the official reaction to the change had been among their new neighbours. The Fen representatives there to try to smooth the official feathers

in regards to the incident in Emerson were the first to react.

"Oh *Force*, no!" Jedi Knight Lou Chadwick drew his hand down his face in a classic facepalm. With a wry and weary grimace, he turned to his companion, Trekkie Lieutenant Nyota Nicholls. "Whoever that asshole is, he gets mad props for the *Captain Scarlet* ref."

"Huh?" Nicholls asked, tugging down the hem of her Original Series Starfleet minidress. "I thought that was Leonard Nimoy in his Frank Force voiceover persona?"

"Be quiet, please," Senator Fairbairn said. "They're still going."

"IT WILL BE USELESS FOR YOU TO RESIST, AS WE HAVE DISCOVERED THE SECRET OF HANDWAVIUM."

In cislunar space, Korolev AFB, Stellvia and Greenwood all exploded into activity at the first sign of the broadcast. Unfortunately, that activity was a simultaneous exclamation of profanity, and so precious seconds were lost.

"Where is that signal coming from?"

"Looks like Babylon .5 is the source point; they're over North America and are blasting on all AM frequencies."

"Well, goddammit get on the line and tell them to *stop!*"

"YOU WILL PAY IN FULL FOR YOUR CRIMES."

{reaction: minor panic in US and CS. No riots or anything, just people cowering in their homes.}

In a small house in St. Vincent, Minnesota, a woman did her best to reassure her mother. "I'm sure it's another hoax, mother, just like Mr. Welles' broadcast two years ago."

"But Millie," the elder Bannister said worriedly as she fiddled with the wireless' knobs, "this is being aired on *all* the stations."

Mildred kept her face impassive, but inwardly started to fret. If this was truly something from one of the stories her brother loved so much, come to life, she'd have to find out more about it so she could tell everyone else in town when they asked about it. But how could she possibly learn the truth?

"DO YOU HEAR US, EARTHMEN? THIS IS THE VOICE OF THE MYSTERONS."

{transmission fades away, government men go on-air to explain the megillah away as a hoax, pranksters, etc.}

(Ideally Norway [As he's the GSS guy] can handle Lufy's arrival and the initial meetings with the RCMP, CF and Yanks as he has a slightly better handle on the GSS people than I do.)

Point Echo, CF Temporary Command Post
19 November 15:37 CDT (Event T+20 hours)

Colonel Ian Gowens stepped out of his CP, dark eyes taking in the soldiers still working to get the meager force at his disposal dug in. The breeze that tugged at his beret had a bite to it, and he pulled his warm jacket closed with a shiver before turning to the south. Emerson was barely visible, a set of bright lights sitting on the darkening horizon, and looking remarkably peaceful. Hopefully it would last.

The last report from Lieutenant-Colonel Maccombe in the town had said that the Yankees were being reasonable, more or less. That they were mostly confused and not terribly belligerent. Well not any more so than most Yanks he corrected in his head.

The hastily assembled delegation from Ottawa had arrived about an hour ago, as had a group of Fen from Greenwood Security Services. The Fen had come in quietly and while they were helping, the Yanks were still not quite convinced about what was happening and who these people were. Although the existence of Emerson seemed to go a fair way in convincing them something was up.

The GSS team leader had gotten in on the last call from Maccombe and assured him that more Fen reinforcements were coming, and that they'd manage to be a bit more impressive this time. Grind the point in, she'd said.

The Colonel was still gazing to the south when Sergeant Arsenault stuck her head out of the tent. "Sir, just got a call from Bagotville. They're tracking a group of eight ships coming down from orbit. They've contacted ATC and identified themselves. It's the OGJ group that Sergeant Starleaf promised us," she said.

"Good. What's their ETA?" the Colonel asked.

"Fifteen minutes."

Nodding Gowens walked back to the tent. The Sergeant stepped aside as he entered. "Get Emerson on the phone, Let's not surprise our people there more than we have to."

A quarter of an hour later Colonel Gowens and Sergeant Arsenault were standing outside the tent again, eyes scanning the sky to the east. The Sergeant had better eyes, and she caught

the movement a heartbeat before Gowens did, her hand coming up and pointing.

The Fen craft were coming in high, and quite fast. In a few minutes they were close enough that sharp eyes could pick out individual craft. There were four tiny airplanes positioned ahead of the main body, two to each side. F-EZigs flying escort, the Colonel recognized them from the hastily memorized flash cards currently sitting in the command post.

Behind the Zigs were four more Fen craft. A small, golden sub-compact car leading the way, followed by two largish cube vans. The fourth and final Fen craft was larger than the others by a good bit. It's hull was circular and grey and four long rectangles projected back from it on short, thin pylons.

"I can't see the NCC numbers on it," the sergeant spoke up. She had a pair of binoculars pressed to her eyes. "Must have only painted them on the dorsal hull."

The Colonel made an acknowledging sound but his own eyes were focused on the car as it broke formation and began to descend rapidly. It wasn't hard to figure out where it was aiming for, and a few quick orders had a party ready to greet the occupants when it pulled to a smooth stop on the highway just north of the command post.

The high pitched whine of the car's engine stuttered to a stop and the driver's side door opened. The car's only occupant stood, and stretched. He was dressed for the chill early November, a heavy leather bomber jacket and scarf with khaki pants and a dark, wide brimmed hat pulled low over his head. He approached the group of soldiers who were waiting for him and greeted the Colonel with a polite nod.

"Sir," he said. "My name's F, and as I understand it, I'm supposed to be helping with a little shock and awe?"

"That's the idea," Colonel Gowens said. He glanced at the other ships, still far overhead and looping south towards Emerson. "Things seem to be going well, and we'd like to convince the Yanks that we're telling the truth."

A gust of wind tugged at everyone's clothing and Ian gestured for F to follow him. "Let's get inside and go over what's been happening," he said.

As the Fen fell into step beside him, the Colonel raised a questioning eyebrow. "Just F, no rank?"

"Technically it's Lieutenant-Colonel," F said, digging a laminated ID card out of a pocket and handing it to him. "But I'm a trouble shooter, not OGJ or faction regular so things are a bit more... vague."

Emerson Manitoba

19 November 16:02 CDT (Event T+21 hours)

Forewarned by the call from Colonel Gowens the GSS crew and Canadian delegates had arranged for a short break in the talks. Captain Jed Eckert had been happy to accept, and he was now standing outside the legion hall, talking to his driver, Sergeant Tanner.

"Yeah, I heard the whole Mysterion thing," he said. "I don't know what's going on. Constable MacGregor seems to be on the up and up, and this town can't have come from nowhere. But some of what they're saying's just too much to take."

He was pacing now, a cigarette clenched between his fingers, while the hand that held it swung to point south. "We can't reach anyone on our side of the border, none of the phone's here will connect and it'll be hours 'til that car I sent gets back."

"Damn it! I can't just push north with out knowing what the hell is going on, but this is American soil and I'm not..."

His sentence was cut off by a low, rolling boom. It came from the north, and overhead. Everyone in the parking lot, everyone in the town probably, was looking up. Seven shapes roared passed, shaking the windows with the sound of their engines.

They slowed, and swooped about in a graceful turn. Four were small planes, too tiny to have engines. Two were large, slab sided trucks, too boxy to be even considered aerodynamic, and the last one was incredible. Larger by far than the others it swung about gracefully, the flying saucer shape banking as it cut through the air.

The cigarette fell from Jedidiah Eckert's nerveless fingers as something dropped from the back of the flying saucer. It was big too, bigger than the trucks, and shaped like a man. It fell through the air for a moment before bright rockets in its boots and back lighted, pushing it upright and slowing its fall.

It landed heavily in the street in front of the legion, dropping to one knee. Then it stood, gleaming in white and blue. A large shield on its left arm, a massive cannon cradled like rifle in its right. The two trucks made their own landings behind it, but most of the Americans, and no few of the Canadians, took little notice. The giant came to attention and presented arms even as men in gleaming white armour piled out of the trucks and began to form ranks.

A polite cough intruded into Eckert's awareness and he turned his head to look at the silly young woman who the Constable had called a Fen. She smiled at him, and he found there was entirely too much tooth showing in that smile for his comfort.

"Perhaps we could take a slightly longer break," she said, smiling all the while. "I need to talk to

my people."

"Um, yes," Captain Eckert found himself saying.

She turned to go and paused, looking back over her shoulder. "Don't worry. They're mostly harmless." Then she winked and continued on her way.

Emerson Manitoba

19 November 17:25 CDT (Event T+ 22 hours)

The door of the Tim Horton's eased closed behind Master Sergeant Lufy Starleaf who looked as though she would rather have slammed it. Scattered around the tables in the restaurant were most of the rest of the team the Fen had sent to 'help' the Canadians with the minor incursion of an armoured column across their border. Claiming a free seat next to the ostensible leaders, she accepted a cup of coffee and dropped her head into her hands with a groan.

"Things aren't going well then?" asked one of the more newly arrived OGJ people, F, Lufy thought he'd been introduced as.

Lufy sighed and took a sip of the coffee. "I think we've managed to head off a shooting war for the immediate future. Lieutenant Carleton seems to have gotten everything calmed down, and that telegram from the US government helped." Lufy stared at the surface of the coffee for a long moment. "Our friend from Foreign Affairs isn't helping too much though." She took another pull on the mug and asked, "What have the Canucks been up to?"

F grimaced, an unhappy expression on his face. "Mobilizing mostly. Between this little incident and the fact they've managed to get a summary of Turtledove's work in front of the Defence Minister, some people in Ottawa are deciding to prepare for the worst." The sour expression on F's face deepened. "I think they're also worried about the upcoming meeting with the Yankee government. They're not going to be able to keep the Governor General a secret for too long." At Lufy's questioning look, he elaborated. "The black, female GG with a white husband, that's going to go over smoothly."

F shook his head and pulled a map over to their table, turning it so Lufy could see. F traced the highway leading from Winnipeg to Emerson. "The closest units to us are reservists, part of 38 Canadian Brigade, and based in Winnipeg." He tapped two points farther west, much farther west. "1 Canadian Mechanized Brigade Group is the closest regular force group in Land Force Western Area, and they're on their way. But they're mostly at Edmonton which is pretty far away. They'll pass through Shilo," here F tapped the map, closer to Winnipeg, "and pick up their artillery, and unfortunately 38 Brigade's artillery here."

Juggling the now empty mug back and forth in her hands Lufy stifled another groan. "They're not going to go off half-cocked are they?"

F shrugged and pushed his battered hat further back on his head. "I don't think so. Colonel Gowens seems pretty solid. But they are digging in north of here, just in case." He traced another line on the map. "They didn't say exactly where, but I get the impression that there's going to be a small army dug in just far enough from Emerson to keep it from getting flattened if the Yanks decide to push north."

F took a drink of his own coffee while Lufy studied the wrinkled and much folded topographic map. Judging by the contours and the rivers, there were a few obvious places for a defender to set up. "I guess we should know, what have they got?"

"Not much. Three regiments, sort of. The Fort Garry Horse are armoured recce, mostly Leopard 2s and C2s. The other two are light infantry, and the Royal Winnipeg Rifles are a single battalion only." Gesturing at the map again, F indicated two small dots to the west and east of Winnipeg, both about twice as far away from the provincial capital as Emerson was. "The closest artillery is in Brandon, waiting for 1 Mechanized, and Kenora."

Leaning back from the table F looked at Lufy for a long moment. "I really hope we can keep things calm here," he said.

"Yeah, well, try talking to our Quebecois friend. He is not making things easy."

F snorted at this. "I'm not surprised. If he's as true blue a nationalist as you've said, he might just be thinking about how this could be used against the Federal government."

Lufy stood up and stared at F, one eyebrow raised. "How the hell did he get this job?"

That got her another shrug as F rose to join her. "Quebec's got a lot of seats in Parliament. You don't get enough of them, you're probably not going to get a majority. So you get appointees in an attempt to make the random Quebecer on the street think the party in charge in Ottawa cares about them." F followed Lufy towards the door, and began to sing. Horribly. "When your voiture cannot start: C'est la faute du federal. If you have a broken heart: C'est la faute du federal..."

"Please stop."

The horrible sound followed Lufy across the parking lot, past the looming blue and white mobile suit standing guard over the restaurant and towards the local legion hall where the negotiators were talking.

"Il fait trop chaud: C'est la faute du federal..."

"Enough!"

19 November 2016, 19:00 EST (Event +24 hours)

"I'm Jake Featherston, and I'm here to tell you the truth." The harsh voice rasped out through wireless sets across the Confederate States and into the United States. "And the truth is..." he trailed off, and for the first time there was a note previously unheard in any of Featherston's speeches.

Uncertainty.

"The truth is, I don't know what's going on." {... need to research this, the official announcement that Something Is Up. Using Featherston here because frankly even tho he's an evil bastard, he's the more interesting character anyfuckingway, so.}

Blog post, dated November 19th
Posted from Pearl Harbour, Hawaii

Tom Foutaise. 'The Great American Conservative'

Vengeance from U.S.

What have I been saying for the last ten years? What have I been saying since these anarchists and terrorists first launched themselves into space? What warnings have I been giving? Were they heeded?

Yesterday, November 18th, 2016... a date which shall live in infamy, the United States was deliberately, and without provocation, attacked by terrorists from within Fenspace. That this attack was not an accident or act of God, there can be no doubt. They have threatened us in the guise of 'Mysterions', overriding our emergency broadcast system to deliver their own monstrous ultimatum.

No force in the Universe exists which can destroy an entire continent, or vanish it out of existence in the blink of an eye. No force but handwavium in the hands of Soviet Stellvian terrorists. Already they have troops rolling across the Canadian border in the guise of our great American Army.

What have I told you all?

Did I not warn you of the dangers of a biological weapon of terrifying power and ability? Did I not warn you of the power of weapons enhanced with this Satanic substance? And now we see the fruits of the willful ignorance of those traitors in Congress who stabbed the American electorate in the back when they ignored those warnings.

A true American patriot would've acted. A true American patriot would've called

for action against these space-born criminals when it first became clear that they could never control their own affairs. True American patriots will respond by calling for retaliation against these obscene terrorists and murders using all the terrible power of our remaining nuclear arsenal.

They have destroyed our country, and we will destroy theirs.

We will not bow to orbital tyranny. If they land we shall fight them on the landing fields. We shall fight them in the hills and in the streets. We shall never surrender.

There are so few of us remaining. We are reduced to refugees in the nations of our allies. I call upon our allies to stand beside us and strike blow for global freedom from fen tyranny. They have awoken a sleeping giant and filled him with terrible resolve.

We are the true Patriots of America. We are the last few. Never in the field of American history has the fate of so many, been dependant on so few.

Now, in the name of Freedom, strike back!

Those are my two cents.

-Tom Foutaise.

SMOFCon Holoconference Call **20 November 2016, 09:00 UTC (Event +33 hours)**

Whoever set up the holoconference had a sense of humor. Or at least they thought they had one. The virtual space had been set up as a simple auditorium, with the holographic representations of the various SMOFs seated by faction facing a center stage where the unlucky bastard who got to be the briefing officer 'stood.' However, since only a small percentage of SMOFs had the equipment to handle holoconferencing, most of the participants used default icons in place of their own selves.

All of this is a roundabout way of explaining why, when Mal Fnord turned on the Soviet holoconferencing suite, he was surrounded by a sea of black monoliths inscribed with 'SMOF,' a number, and 'SOUND ONLY.'

"All right," he said. "If everybody's here, then I hereby call this emergency meeting of the Secret Masters of Fandom to order."

"Where's Scott?" demanded SMOF 05, from the Galactic Republic section. "He's the one who called the SMOFCon, so why isn't he here?"

“Mr. Scott,” Mal replied, “is on Odyssey, busy setting up the main Convention. Since he’s working with his staff there – and since I was the one who insisted on a SMOFCon as well – I’m running the show here.” It was hard to tell if 05 was satisfied, since monoliths don’t have much in the way of tells, but it didn’t press the issue. “If that’s settled,” he continued, “we’ll get on with the briefing.”

A view of Earth popped into existence behind Mal. “As you all know by now, at zero hundred hours Zulu on the 19th, something extraordinary happened on Earth. As far as we’ve been able to determine, the continental United States of America, the Peoples Republic of Cuba and sections of Mexico were replaced, by parties unknown for reasons unknown, with two new nations. One resembles the United States as it was before the Second World War, and the other seems to be the Confederate States of America.

“Based on signals intelligence coming from the area, we’ve been able to determine *where* these nations come from. They’re from these books.” The view of Earth shimmered and was replaced by a set of books with lurid covers. “These are the Southern Victory or Timeline-191 books by Dr. Harry Turtledove. They’re an alternate history series based on the premise that the Confederacy won the American Civil War. We’ve also been able to determine – roughly – the point in the timeline where our wayward nations came from: near the end of this book.” Most of the books vanished, leaving only one titled *The Victorious Opposition* behind.

“A detailed summary of this book and the following four novels has been prepared and transmitted to you. The important thing to take away here is that at the *end* of this book, the Confederate States declares war on the United States. We’ve got a hard date for that, June 22nd, 1941. According to the transmissions from the ground, it’s still November 1940 there.”

“That’s all well and good,” said SMOF 02, from the front of the Browncoat section. “But we’ve got more important problems to deal with. Like the United States vanishing. That’s going to wreak havoc on the ‘Danelaw. What do we do about that?”

“That’s a good point,” said SMOF 47, down in the Cyber section. “The loss of the US has caused some serious comm problems downstairs. Most of Earth’s Internet and telephone cables routed through the USA, and a good chunk of the rest of the net collapsed from overload a few minutes later. It’s recovering, but without those trunks we don’t know how long it’ll be before we have reliable communications with the ‘Danelaw.”

“I’ve had some communication with the surface,” Chris Marsden, one of the few SMOFs to have the full holconference suite, spoke up for the first time. “The USA is regrouping right now, obviously things are kind of... disorganized. We had a stroke of luck, though; the President was in Hawaii when the whatever-it-was happened, so there’s a clear leader for people to rally around.”

“Wait, I thought you said the US was gone,” complained SMOF 73.

Marsden shook his head. “No, he said the *continental US* was gone,” he pointed out. “Alaska and Hawaii are still there, and so are Puerto Rico, Guam and the other overseas territories, not to mention a whole bunch of US military personnel who were stationed in places like Korea, Afghanistan, Europe, Japan...”

“How are they handling it?” Mal asked.

“So far, about as well as you’d expect,” Chris said. “I’ve only talked a little with TSAB and some of their backers at PACCOM, but they’re willing to let us lead. Admiral Swimsuit said ‘you people are the best at dealing with freaky shit like this,’ which I *think* was an endorsement.” A small current of laughter rippled around the room.

“And the public?”

“Not as happy, I’m afraid. The ones who aren’t just in shock are looking for someone to blame, and well, we’re it.”

The monolith labeled SMOF 137 spoke up. “I think our first priority is to stay alive. How many of us are still dependent on the Vitamin Men to bring medicine and trace elements up from Earth? What can we do for those people? After that, there’s a sizable force of American military personnel who just had their supply lines vanish.”

“Forget the military,” said SMOF 33. “*Hawaii* gets most of its food from the mainland. They’re going to start running out, and quick.”

“I’m not sure we could guarantee a food supply, though,” noted SMOF 23. “The farms on Mars and the Galileans are enough to keep us self-sufficient, but we’re talking about adding another million or so people into the mix. The margin there is awfully thin.”

“Here’s an idea,” Marsden said. “If we can get support from the other Belters and the major construction combines, we could start putting up agricultural stations at L4, enough that we could start feeding Hawaii in four months. We’ve got a half-dozen proven designs in the Greenwood computers, all we need is extra hands.”

SMOF 01, from the Federation, spoke up. “Utopia Planitia and the other Federation shipyards will throw in for construction work.”

“I don’t know how much good it’ll be,” offered SMOF 108, the only representative in the *Grover’s Corners* section, “but by necessity we’ve become pretty adept at space agriculture. We can send folks to help with getting things planted and growing.”

Mal nodded. “Good, you guys work it out after the meeting.”

“Another question,” said 02. “Let’s say we do or don’t send supplies to the US. What’s the next step? Do we go looking for our lost friends and relatives?”

“Yeah,” said SMOF 19 from over in the Timelord section. “What about *our* US? Where did it go, and more important.. can we get it *back*?” Monoliths and heads alike turned to the podium.

Mal sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Stellvia is setting up a working group on that problem.”

“The Mads are taking care of it,” 137 piped up.

“That doesn’t inspire confidence,” 19 replied.

“As I see it,” Mal interrupted before a fight could break out, “a solution isn’t going to happen tomorrow, or next week, or even next year. We may see results quickly, but frankly I wouldn’t put money on it. Our primary concern right now should be securing our position and dealing with our uninvited guests.” As the SMOFs digested that, he opened a private channel to 137. “I thought you sounded familiar. Why aren’t you helping Noah, Yayoi?”

“He wanted somebody to represent Stellvia at the SMOFCon. Let’s go back to the main discussion; I don’t want to miss anything important. I’ll tell you more later.” She closed the private channel.

“- all I’m saying is,” 01 was in the middle of a disquisition, “is that the United Federation of Planets will back whatever we decide to do, even if it includes military action.”

“Oh *really*,” jeered SMOF 63, near the back of the room. “Wouldn’t that violate your precious Prime Directive?”

“The Prime Directive is more a guideline than a strict rule,” 01 replied primly.

“Uh-huh, sure. That’s a primitive civilization down there, you’d just *love* to watch them kill each other, wouldn’t you? All to maintain your non-interference.”

“That policy never applied to Earth, and it wouldn’t apply now!”

“Tell it to the Boralaans!”

“That never happened!”

“Hey! HEY!” Mal broke in. “Look, dammit,” he said sharply, “we don’t need this shit. You heard Christopher, the US – not to mention the *rest of the goddamned world* – is going to be looking to

us for guidance on this. We don't need to get into stupid slapfights with each other. Pull it together, people!"

"Federation-loving commie lapdog," 63 muttered. Mal scowled.

"Right, you get a time-out." SMOF 63's monolith vanished, and somewhere in the asteroid belt the voice behind the monolith swore as his entire communications system bluescreened.

"Right," Mal said. "Anybody else want to start something?" Silence. "Good."

"Okay," said SMOF 04. "I think we're all in agreement that we should back up the US remnant to the best of our ability, right?" There was a murmur of general agreement. "Great. So, what do we do about the *new* US, and the Confederacy? I've been looking at the documents, and it looks like they're both about ready to go for each other's throat."

Mal smiled. "Well, it just so happens that the Soviet Air Force has put together a proposal. We like to call this little ditty Operation FIREFALL." The image of the Turtledove book behind Mal vanished, replaced with a simple logo: the Spaceship and Sun on black, with a rainbow above it. "Those of you with knowledge of history may recognize this. To answer your question, yes we stole it, and yes we have no shame. Now:

"FIREFALL is an operational plan designed to either avert the coming war in North America, or to blunt the effect of that war should our efforts prove futile. The main combatants coming into our world are the United States and Confederate States. They've already fought a war some thirty years previous to this, and right now they're both gearing up for a war to the knife. Furthermore, we know from the books that the Confederate States is beginning to exterminate their black population, as in the death camps are starting up as we speak." There was an uncomfortable silence at this revelation. "Obviously, none of us are willing to see this kind of monstrosity happen again on our world. So we're going to stop it.

"Our first priority is to make contact with the nations in the affected zone. This will give us a better idea of exactly what we're dealing with – we can't assume the books are a hundred per cent accurate. Also, Turtledove was interested in writing a novel, and things like accurate orders of battle or troop deployments aren't in the books. So we need more and better intel, and the best way to get that is to get into the zone as soon as possible. If at all possible, we should try and ally ourselves with the new US as well.

"The next priority is to make a case for joint action. I don't think we'll have to go far for that, to be honest. Even if the remnant is still busy pulling itself together, the other NATO members and the United Nations will be interested in joint operations.

"Once we have backing from the rest of the 'Danelaw, we make a full-court press on *both* nations. We can use a combination of carrot and stick on both; technology initiatives, infrastructure upgrades, that sort of thing for the carrot, and pointing out that they have no real

friends at hand for the stick.

“Assuming we play carrot and stick well enough, we may be able to avert open war between Union and Confederacy. If not, then we will have to act. And acting will involve military action. The ‘Danelaw powers can handle brute force attacks, we’ll involve ourselves with lightning strikes on Confederate territory; stopping the death camps being the first priority.

“This is a preliminary plan, and I’ve sent all of you our documents to review. Still, in my mind this represents the best way forward to rebuild stability in the ‘Danelaw and prevent the Confederate States from becoming a threat to that stability.” Mal stepped back from the podium for a moment, to give the others time to think.

“A question, General,” said SMOF 128, from near the edge of the Patrol section. “Who will we be dealing with in our diplomatic talks?”

“We’ll be dealing with the leaders of the US and CS. Respectively, President Al Smith and President Jake Featherston. Smith has an analogue in our history, he was the presidential candidate who lost to Herbert Hoover in the 1928 election. Here, he’s the former Socialist governor of New York, and has just been reelected to a second term in office. Featherston, well...” Mal shrugged. “He’s Hitler. He’s a canny operator with a lot of populist appeal and a raging hate-on for a lot of things.”

“Just how left-wing is this Smith character?” Marsden asked. “Can he be trusted? Can we work with him, if we have to?”

“Well,” Mal said, “according to the data we have he’s a New Deal-style reformer, largely what his role was in our history. So yes, Christopher, he’s a horrible communist who will put you in a camp as soon as he sees your business suit.” A ripple of laughter - louder from the Federation side of the aisle - went around the conference space. “More seriously, he’s about as trustworthy as politicians get down in the transfer zone. He’ll want to avoid open conflict, but when the chips are down he’ll be a decent war leader. Smith and the Socialists are also the only major political force in the area that *aren’t* horribly revanchist, so keeping them in power will help once the dust clears.”

“Okay, I fail to see how this is our problem,” SMOF 91 said. “How often do we get pissed about the ‘Danelaw meddling in our affairs? I for one don’t want to get into the middle of another war, not after the last one.”

“Because we can stop millions from dying needlessly,” Mal replied, and snapped his fingers. 91’s monolith vanished. “So,” he said, “does anyone else want to say something stupid? No?”

“Just a second,” said SMOF 67. “He was right about one thing. We’re getting into the middle of what amounts to World War Two here! Are we going to be able to do this without getting anyone

killed, because if it goes bad and gets us fighting both sides, we're going to get hammered."

"Well," said Mal, "we're going to *try* and end this without bloodshed. And if we make a good enough first impression, it might even work. But here's the thing: if this goes bad and we end up in a war, we're not fighting alone. We'll have six *billion* people backing us up, and a lot of them will be fighting alongside. This isn't going to be another brushfire clusterfuck like the Boskone War. If we go to war against anybody in the transfer zone, we'll have the backing of *everybody* who matters in the 'Danelaw."

"We also have the technological advantage," added 137. "Even without handwavium, a 1940s-era military force with bombers and carriers will be hard-pressed to defend against a 21st Century force with drones and cruise missiles. Their infantry's camouflage is nothing compared to ours. I could go on, but I think we all get the idea. If we do end up in a war, we should be able to win it, although the death toll doesn't bear thinking about."

67 nodded, before realizing the action wouldn't be transmitted. "I see. Hopefully it won't be necessary."

"Agreed," Mal said. "So, Secret Masters of Fandom, do we go with the FIREFALL plan?"

"The Galactic Republic," said SMOF 03, "seconds the motion to move forward on Operation FIREFALL."

"So do the Browncoats," added SMOF 05.

"The Federation's already stated their position," said SMOF 01.

"Call for a vote?"

"All in favor of adopting Operation FIREFALL?" Mal asked. The response was overwhelming. "Very well, then—"

"All in favor of appointing General Fnord and the Soviet Air Force as headquarters element for Operational FIREFALL?" 137 added. The response was equally overwhelming. Mal sighed.

"Well, guess I was asking for that," he said.

Yayoi popped up in a private channel. "Yes, you were," she said.

(...something else happens in between these two bits.)

SMOFCon Holoconference Call
20 November 2016, 11:30 UTC (Event +35.5 hours)

“So!” Mal said brightly. “Who wants to go meet the President?”

The sudden silence was deafening. One wag near the back of the Republic’s section set off a recording of crickets chirping.

“...Really?” Mal sighed. “Okay, fine. If the rest of *you* are afraid of volunteering, then I nominate myself. All opposed?” Still nothing. “The ayes have it.”

“Mal,” Chris said severely, “if you think I’m letting you near that - that *politician* - without somebody to keep an eye on you, you’re slugging *nuts*.”

“Why, Christopher,” Mal replied sweetly. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I trust you exactly as much as Roosevelt trusted Stalin,” Marsden growled. “You’re more worthy of it than he was. Stay that way.”

“We can stand here all day reminding ourselves how much we *hate* each other,” Mal said, “but we don’t have the time. So, Christopher and I will be the delegation to the United States. Who wants the Confederacy?”

This time, the noise in response was overwhelming.

Mal sighed. “I do wish Yayoi hadn’t said some of the things she said, though.”

“What about what she said?” Ben asked, puzzled.

“The part about our technological superiority?” Chris asked.

“Got it in one,” replied Mal. Chris nodded grimly. Ben still looked puzzled.

“Wait a second, why is that a problem? I mean, we *do* have the tech edge. It’s not like the Confederates are hiding spaceships or anything... are they?”

“No, they’re not hiding spaceships,” Chris said. “They’re all at a 1940s tech level.”

“So what’s the big deal?”

“We can take them one-on-one, Ben,” Mal said. “The problem is, they have a lot more ones than we do.”

“Well... yeah. Of course they do, the Fen military is tiny compared to the CSA.”

“It’s more than that. Our technology is more advanced, sure, but that means that the gear’s more complex to boot. More complex means that it’s more expensive, and more expensive means there’s not as much of it.”

“Not to mention,” Chris put in, “that a big chunk of the industry required to build all of this stuff just went poof with the United States.”

“We’re not fighting a war here, Ben,” Mal said. “We’re running a race. Can we neutralize the Confederate States – by hook or by crook, peacefully or otherwise – before we run out of bullets? And I honestly don’t know if it’s a race we can win.”

Ben nodded. “Well, we’d better get started then, shouldn’t we?”

MEANWHILE... this is more Rob’s hobbyhorse than mine (mainly to keep Rob focused on LoGG instead of TSIR,SGAH), but since it’s all really part of one story it deserves mention here: Various Fen mad scientists are gathering at Odyssey in order to fuel Noah Scott’s mad quest for wherever the FTL-US got off to.

ANYWAY... we cap this section off with the Fen Embassy to the 191-US and the CSA. This one ought to pretty much the same way we planned it to in the 0.1a version: We send the VVS to Philadelphia and Grover’s Corners to Richmond. Many omgs and lulz to be had by all.

~***~

Recreational Park, Level 1, Odyssey Station **21 November 2016, 08:00 UTC (Event T+56 hours)**

"Ladies, gentlemen, and others, thank you for coming to Odyssey on such short notice. I called this Convention because I knew that something terrible had happened on Earth. After gathering the evidence of what actually did happen, I have to admit that I underestimated the situation.

"You've all seen Tyger Tyger's video played on the screen behind me. Most of you have heard the recordings that Azu Squadron made. Many of you have heard rumors about what the SMOFs discussed yesterday. Some of you have read Captain Garret's report. I doubt there's anyone here who hasn't either read Mr. Turtledove's books or at least asked a Yomiko about them by now. So I won't waste everyone's time explaining what happened just before I called this Convention.

"Those of us who had families and friends in the continental United States have suffered a loss - one made worse in that we don't actually know what happened to our loved ones. But as long as we live and think, we can work toward finding the people who have been taken away from us. Yes, we have been left behind, but that just means that we should follow the path before us, once we can find it. I'm not going to lie to you - this will be a long and difficult task. But we are Fen, and I believe we can do anything we set our minds to!

"Before we set out in search of our loved ones, we have a more pressing matter to deal with. We have new neighbors - ones currently confined to the cradle of Mother Earth, but only a fool would think they will remain in their homelands for very long even if we don't offer to share our road to the stars with them. And I don't need to tell you how willing they are to take up arms against their fellow man. We must speak with them - not with artifice, not as disembodied "Mysterion" voices on the radio, but honestly, openly, and face to face, from the leaders in their highest levels of power to the most humble men and women in their poorest slums.

"We must do this because there is no indication that they will be leaving our Earth any time soon, if ever. Every sign we have seen shows that our homeworld with all its faults is a kinder, gentler place than theirs is. If we do not teach them how to work with the nations of our Earth, the blood they shed will be on our hands.

"Our goals here are threefold: Make contact with the people currently living in the continental United States, make peace with them but not "peace at any price", and find our lost friends and relatives. This is a tall order, but I see no reason why we cannot accomplish it if we work together.

"With this statement of intent, I declare this Emergency Convention open."

~***~

Owner's Office, Odyssey

22 November 2016 (Event T+3 days; OdysseyCon Day 2)

Noah came to a decision. The other androids he'd built had knowledge and abilities that the characters they were based on knew and had; maybe he could use that to his advantage. Even if it took a few months for the new android to awaken, it would still be faster than organizing the data pertaining to interdimensional travel in the original Whole Fenspace Catalog's grimoires and teaching people to use it from a standing start.

"Safety, get Sanda Makoto-san on the line; I need every scrap of information available about *Rental Magica*. We're building an artificial mage." That phrase knocked a few memories loose in his head. "Then hire Ueda Kana-san and get her up to Stellvia."

If we're lucky, thought Noah as Safety moved to her videophone, *involving her in the process of*

waving Honami might mix in a few abilities from Ueda-san's other powerful prodigy mage character. Assuming of course that a cross between Honami and Hayate is a good thing...

~***~

**Captain's Cabin, SS Ciara, docked with Odyssey Station.
22 November 2016 21:27 UTC**

Garret held the receiver to his ear, waiting for it to pick up.

"Jet here. Sorry but I'm not in right now. Just leave a message after the laugh, and I'll probably get to you within the week."

The other end of the line cackled like Doctor Frankenstein. Garret sighed and hung up, well the apartment at Genaros was a bust. And since he wasn't at the con, Jet could've been anywhere. One last Hail-Mary gambit. He rooted around inside his drawer for a few minutes before pulling out his old phone.

Thank God it still had some battery life. He clicked through his contacts, looking for one particular phone number... and entered it into the keypad.

Silence for a few moments, before it started to ring.

"Hello" Kinuko Oomori's voice answered, "Ray?"

"Well, you still remember me man," Ray smiled, relieved, "Now I'm sorry mate, but this isn't a social call..."

"Figured as much."

"Well, I'll just cut to the chase. I'm stuck out here at OdysseyCon, and I'm stuck in the middle of the EU delegation, trying to convince them to go with Firefall."

"You have my sympathies,"

Ray could almost hear the cyborg at the other end laughing.

"Well yeah. The German's are game... as you'd expect, along with the Greeks and Poles. Denmark is sitting on the fence. Spain, maybe. It's the French and Italians that are holding out. Now they have good reasons,"...not... " but... well, I was hoping you might be able to help me give 'em a kick in the arse to get going,"

"Right..." a pause. "And what might the position of the Irish Government be?"

Garret winced. How did he?

"I've been instructed to maintain military neutrality, meet our obligations to EU battlegroup Nordic, maintain our humanitarian reputation and try wrangle more trade contracts with Fennish corporations in exchange for our help. Same shite as the other 'danes." He laughed.

"So. What sort of arse kick where you thinking of?"

"Well..." Garret took a deep breath, "How soon would you be able to get down to the Confederate States, and get back out here to Odyssey?"

"6:35am tomorrow morning," Jet answered unnaturally quickly. "Though that depends how long I stay down there,"

"Not long." Garret said. "Just a quick overflight of a camp. If you can take some pictures of the camp in Louisiana, and get them out to me. I think a few photographs of what's actually going on down there might be enough to jog them into action."

"You do know it's a no-fly zone down there since that dope on Point-Five thought she'd scare the crap out of them?"

"I know that's never stopped you man," he snarked back.

"Heh... Good point. I'll do it. I was going to fly out to the Con tomorrow anyway to meet Sierra. So I'll see you there,"

"Right, thank's mate. I'll owe you one,"

He hung up the phone, and leant back in his chair. Thinking. He stared at the dossiers on his desk, and the half-read copy of the book laying face down on top of them.

Fenspace wanted him to bring the EU countries in. The European council would follow the recommendations of its ambassadors, they'd managed to agree on that. With the condition that that recommendation was unanimous.

He'd been asked to bring them in by the Trekkies. His own government was asking to keep them out of any armed conflict. Half of the EU ambassadors were willing to get in, boots and tanks and all. The others, at best still needed convincing.

He understood their fear. Fear of another dimension jump with half their army deployed in the CSA. Fear of a doublecross. Fear of sending people to die.

Now, back to his own Government. They'd given him a list of things they were willing to do. And what they wanted in return. Refugee camp in exchange for farming subsidies. Surplus food that'd just have been dumped in anyways in exchange for increased fishing quotas and infrastructure funding. Bullshit stuff he didn't really care about.

He made a note to send copies of those pictures he'd asked for back to them, along with the revelation that the Irish Government unconditionally support any resolution for action. And if they didn't agree with that, he was certain the people would after seeing those very same pictures.

Yes. That'd do it.

Something about it felt satisfyingly devious. He went to bed for the first time since the dropout with that thought.

~***~

St. Vincent, Minnesota

Friday, November 22, 1940, 5:37 p.m. CST

Mildred Bannister shrugged out of her blue woolen overcoat and, after shaking off the light dusting of snow it had acquired in her walk home from the library, hung it on the hook in the mudroom of the modest home she shared with her mother. She absently tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear that had fallen out of the tight bun she wore as the town's assistant librarian.

"Mother?" she called. "I'm home." She walked into the parlor and smiled at the sight. Her mother sat in the large, comfortable chair that had belonged to her father with her legs under a granny square afghan that she had remembered helping her grandmother make. Her mother was knitting a sweater while the wireless was tuned to a station playing classical music.

"Oh?" Her mother looked up from her knitting. "Hello, dear. How was your day?"

Millie let out a frustrated sigh. "All sorts of flabble about that 'Mysterons' hoax. And of course, since I'm a librarian, they assume I know what's going on with it."

"Well, don't you maintain poor Johnny's subscriptions to those Zap Gun Pulp magazines and spend an inordinate time watching those Republic serials at the Bijou?" her mother asked with a gentle smile. It was tinged with sadness, as Millie's older brother had died five years ago serving in the Army up in Canada.

Millie spluttered. "Well of course I do! I just don't know anything about the sort of person who

could override all of our wireless stations. Probably some sort of kook who worked it up after that Welles Fiasco last Halloween.” She set her newest copies of Analog and Astounding on the side table by her chair and made her way to the kitchen. “Do you want anything special for supper?”

“I’m sure whatever you make will be fine, Mildred.” Her mother’s smile widened. “You’re such a good cook, dear. When are you going to get married?”

“Mother,” Millie chuckled at the old barb. “I’m twenty-three, I still have time.” She started a pot to boil for rice and went to the icebox for the beef she’d bought yesterday. “Besides, all the good men around here are taken, or are the sort that frown on an ‘educated’ woman like myself.” She sighed and returned to her cooking, daydreaming about a man who would not be intimidated by her intelligence, or love for cheesy science fiction.

**Break Room, SS Ciara, docked with Odyssey Station.
23 November 2016 10:13 UTC**

Misha watched through a gap in the curtains which partitioned the room off from the rest of the ship. It was supposed to be a secret diplomatic meeting, but Milly had shown her the pictures after printing them out. Milly had also forwarded them on by email, despite the Captain asking her not to. After seeing them, she could understand why.

She just watched in silence, curious to see how the mundane humans would react.

The EU ambassadors all sat around the break room table, ashen-faced and silent. Garret watched them, sick to his stomach... and glad he’d had an early breakfast. Meg had actually cried when she saw those photographs..

“One thing,” he said, his voice barely above a whisper, “One thing those pictures don’t convey is the smell,” How had Jet put it? “The pilot who took them... he said it was like flying through a sewer. A stench of disease and despair... of pure death and misery aerosolised and mingled with hot ash and poor antiseptic.

This is Camp *Dependable*. And... if you’ve read the source material, you know what is happening here... or what is...about to happen.”

Georg sat back, placing the pictures on the table. He swallowed a lump in his throat. Marie, gasped and covered her mouth, nervously glancing around at the others for a moment. Piotrek looked at the German ambassador beside him, and sighed softly to himself. The Spanish ambassador struggled to find something.... anything he could say. Kokkino looked at Georg. Anders, stopped halfway through, unable to look at any more.

Nobody said a word.

The only sounds in the room were the rustling of papers, and the distant rumble of the ship's generators. The diplomats did their best to calmly take notes in their books... to keep to their assigned mission... but it was an uphill struggle.

There was a difference between reading of a holocaust in a book, written in dry printed prose, and being faced with one live and in living high definition colour, photographed only a few hours earlier. It had a raw immediacy that struck deep in a way no simple description could ever hope to match.

A picture was worth a thousand words. Printed words insulated the reader from the true horrors that only a photograph could convey.

It's must've been nearly a half-hour before the French ambassador broke the silence. He placed a picture on the the table.

A little girl being held by her mother, reaching for a man being dragged away by uniformed guards.

"These...." his mouth gaped for a moment. "....are people."

That was all that needed to be said. That was all that could be said.

~***~

War Department, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
November 23, 1940 (Event +4 days)

"Lieutenant."

"Retired, sir." The 'lieutenant' in question was a tall man in his mid thirties, with close-cropped hair and a pencil mustache. In civilian clothes he looked much like an average worker, or perhaps a policeman.

Abell shook his head. "Not any more, Lieutenant Commander." The now ex-lieutenant's eyebrows rose at the new rank. "The General Staff has decided to recall you to duty."

"That's... swell, sir. But why? Surely there are plenty of lieutenant commanders in the Navy as it is."

"There are, but that's not why we're recalling you." Abell examined the stack of papers on his

desk. "You're making something of a name for yourself in the pulps these days, aren't you, Lieutenant Commander?"

"Yes sir. It's not the most glamorous of work, but it keeps body and soul together." The light went on in the commander's eyes. "That's why you're recalling me, isn't it? It's something to do with this Mysteron flabble. Sir."

John Abell was not a man given to expressions of approval, but a faint note of satisfaction glimmered in his eyes. "Very good, Lieutenant Commander. The President has agreed to meet with the, ah, *new neighbors* in two days time. You will be part of the General Staff's contribution to the meeting."

"The General Staff thinking I have some sort of insight into the Mysterons that more sober generals and admirals might miss?"

"I couldn't possibly say," Abell replied, which was for the commander all but shouting 'YES!' to the heavens.

The commander snapped off a perfect parade-ground salute. "Sir! I will do my duty!"

"Very good, Commander Heinlein. Dismissed. Get yourself some new dress blues from Quartermaster; your briefing packet will be delivered to your hotel room."

Mughi's, Odyssey Station, Mars Orbit **November 23, 2016 12:15 UTC**

Sabre ducked into the bar, hoping to find somewhere quiet to hide from the people that keep stopping him about his video. After the 20th time being grilled by a passerby he was tired of it. He didn't notice Jet or her friend as he sulks past with his tail trailing in his wake. He was too focused on finding a empty dark corner to hide in.

At first, Jet didn't recognise the Avatar Android... she was halfway through a whiskey bottle, and was still feeling perfectly sober. It was just a flavour thing for her. Beside her, a tanned-skinned woman with dark hair and a metallic arm that glinted in the bar's lights was calling her an idiot.

"Think about it Jet." Ford Sierra admonished, "You'd be attacking them, right when we're offering peace terms."

Jet stopped mid excuse... the glare brought the cyborg crashing to earth. "Right... you're right," she sighed. "I just.... I just feel like shit just sitting here when they're down there... y'know." Jet sighed. "I don't want to be the person who knew about it, and sat and watched it happen."

"Besides, how would ten of you get ten-thousand or more off the ground?"

The cyborg exhaled a long breath, “Right....and...”

“And organising an airlift inside 2 days is a logistical impossibility.” Sierra continued, “Not only will you need something to put them in, We’ll need somewhere to put them out as well. We’ll need food, water, shelter, medical supplies, a proper refugee camp. It’d take weeks to organise to do right.... by which time it’ll probably be time for the approved liberation.... Doing it wrong will just get a lot of people killed. This is *not* something to go off half-cocked on...”

“I know” Jet held up her hands, “I’ll behave,”

“I know what you’re like when you get an idea into your head. The path to hell is paved with good intentions that aren’t thought through properly.”

“I know....”

Sierra placed her hand on Jet’s cheek, snapping her out of it. Jet smiled apologetically.

“...I was being stupid,” she finished.

Sabre side stepped around a drunk warsie bragging about the size of the lightsaber in his pants. “It’s *this* big and *this* shiny, want me to take it out?” bumping into Jet’s table. The warsie noticed Sabre and grabbed him by the arm, “H-hey aren’t you the one that took that T-tyger video?” Sabre pulled his arm away causing the warsie to stagger. “No, you must have me confused with someone else.”

Sierra grabbed her glass with her natural hand to stop it from toppling. “Hey! Watch the damn tail will ya,”

Sabre glanced over at Sierra, “Sorry, having to dodge drunks.” He gave the warsie a slight push towards the group he had been talking to.

The warsie fell flat on his face with a drunken squawk of surprise.

Sabre just shook his head and then turned back to the table, “Hey Jet.”

The cyborg blinked, “I know you?”

“The Kentucky Cat.”

“Oh...” a light flickered on behind her eyes. She checked for a particular carrier signal. “Telepresence body?”

She already knew the answer. And who'd made it.

Sabre nodded as he waved to get the barkeep's attention and pointed at the fallen warsie that decided the floor was a good place to sleep. "Kinda hard to talk to people as a 78 ton warmachine."

Jet chuckled, before glancing at her glaring girlfriend. "Uh.... Ford, this is Stae Nor, from *that* mission in America. Stae, this is my girlfriend, Ford Sierra,"

"After the car... and the Hitchikers guide," Sierra smirked, waving a metal arm.

Sabre chuckled as he nodded to Sierra "I usually go by Sabre Fang now, but you can call me Stae Nor as well." He looked over at Jet, "I still owe you for pulling me out of that mess."

"I think the lawyers are still arguing over it." Jet indicated towards a spare stool, "You can join if you'd like. Sierra was just talking me out of doing something dumb,"

"I have to keep his feet on the ground," she grinned.

He chuckled again as he sat down on the bar stool. Wrapping his tail around it and his legs to keep it out of the way. "So what evil plan were you plotting?"

Sierra scowled at him.

"Liberate Camp Dependable," Jet stated, deliberately not mentioning the timescale he'd been planning on doing it.

He sat up a little straighter, "I've thought about hitting that place myself since I found out about it. I think everybody has..... Land the Tyger Tyger in the middle of the damn camp and pack it to the gills." He shook his head, "Then reality slapped me upside the head. Going off half cocked would get people killed."

Jet wore a devious smirk.

"No," Sierra stamped her foot down.

Jet continued to smirk.

"Not a chance in hell,"

"You did say it'd take weeks to plan it right, right?" Jet asked, knowing the answer. "Well, what's the harm in at least making a proposal to Firefall Command?"

Sierra shook her head with an exasperated sigh.

"We're not going to do it," Jet explained, "We're going to work out how to do it, so that when we propose this, they're more likely to accept it if we can demonstrate *how* it can be done."

"If you need lift I can throw the Tyger into the pot. I'm already becoming known for having been right on the edge of the event." Sabre sighed. "Makes me thankful that I've not released that other video."

Jet's eyebrow rose. "Other video?"

Sabre pulled out a waved PDA and set it down on the table. "Took it shortly after the event." He selected a file and played it. It shows a high speed night pass of a aircraft carrier and escort group that seems to come right out of the WW2 era. Main fact that they seem to be aware that his ship was there was when the spotlights and guns pointed his way. "I think it was the USS Remembrance from the books."

Jet's expression suddenly turned sombre, "I've got some pictures as well. I took them early this morning... but I'm not sure it's anything you want to see." She placed a cold metal hand against her hot forehead, "They're not supposed to be made public anyway, just for a friend who needed to convince someone to go with Firefall,"

"Of the camp aren't they?" He winced

Jet nodded, before looking away at Sierra. "It's nasty,"

"Figured, most wouldn't know what racism is even if I hit them over the head with my grandfather's body."

"So..." Jet took a deep breath, "You want to help put this together?"

Sierra gave the pair of them a grim look.

Sabre nods, "I might have the lift to remove most of the camp if not all of it." He presses something on the PDA to bring up the stats on the Tyger Tyger.

Jet looked to her girlfriend expectantly, like a puppy looking for dinner.

"Oh alright," Sierra rolled her eyes, "Just don't do anything stupid. Or without clearance,"

"I agree with her on the clearance part." he chuckled, "Point of planning is to avoid something stupid."

“So,” Jet said, looking at the other two. “How’re we going to do this?”

~***~

Owner's Office, Odyssey Station

November 23, 2016, 13:20 UTC

"Sir, there's a rumor going around the convention that somebody's planning to liberate Camp Dependable."

Noah looked up from his notes to see his Chief of Security. "Why do you never have any good news for me, Mishima-san?" Before she could answer, he continued, "Never mind. It was a rhetorical question. If they're planning on doing so while FIREFALL is making peace overtures, let them know quietly that whoever breaks discipline on FIREFALL will find it difficult to do business with Wonderland Farms, StelOil, or any other StellviaCorp subsidiary. Ever."

"It isn't difficult to survive in Fenspace without doing business with StellviaCorp."

"True," Noah admitted, "if you're at least on friendly terms with at least one of the Big Six factions. And they're part of FIREFALL, too."

"What do we do if the plotters are willing to wait until after the peace talks break down?"

"You're awfully pessimistic today, Kagome."

"I prefer 'realistic.'"

"Well, I hope you're wrong. If they're willing to wait, we'll help them. Carrot and stick doesn't just apply to the outtimers, after all. Make sure they know about the MASH unit that the Nikaido Foundation and the Blue Blazers have sitting idle at asteroid 4077; they may need medical supplies."

"Yes, sir." She saluted and left.

I really have to break her of that habit, thought Noah. We aren't an army.

I hope.

~***~

Message from EU delegation to OdysseyCon, 15:21 UTC

It has been made clear to us that a great humanitarian tragedy is unfolding within this

Confederate States. It is easy to read of a tragedy on paper, but when faced with raw images of deplorable human suffering, it compels us to act. Regardless of the origin of the event that brought this tragedy to our world, or the identities of those behind it, we recognise the necessity of action. 65 years ago, we said 'Never Again' and we will stand by this.

It is the intention of this delegation to recommend to the Council of Europe that the European Union provide military and or humanitarian support to any mission within the North American territory formerly occupied by the United States of America.

While they are not bound to abide by this recommendation, and nothing in this message should be construed as indicating that the Council of Europe is bound to abide by this recommendation, we do however feel that when shown the evidence we have been shown, the Council of Europe would be unlikely not to abide by our recommendation.

We will advise the Convention of the Council's decision when it arrives.

On behalf of the Nations and People of the European Union:
His Excellency Georg Lusser. Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany

Mughi's, Odyssey Station, Mars Orbit
November 23, 2016 18:47 UTC

Jet finished the bottled, and signaled for another. Sierra looked at her girlfriend through bleary eyes for a moment. At the bar, someone was talking about a set of god-awful photographs of Camp Dependable someone had taken that were doing the rounds via email.

Jet grimaced. Those weren't supposed to have been leaked.

"Probably squeeze a second floor into the hangers, they are designed with lots of headroom for zoids that people won't need." Sabre carried on with the plan, nothing things to a distant harddisk.

"Collapsible deck? Where do we carry the zoids?" Sierra Interjected.

"Only two zoids so closest hanger to the doors. Or park them up by the ramp so they are the first off and last on. The Engel can take over the launch ramp and lift area to it."

"That'd be grand." nodded Jet, "We also need somewhere to store the prisoners."

"One of the cargo holds? there may not be that many."

"They'll be in good health getting aboard. They can handle 'uncomfortable' conditions." Sierra said. "Our big problem's going to be the camp's prisoners. They're going to be weak, they're

going to be malnourished, they're going to be diseased. We need some sort of medical help,"

Jet groaned to herself, "This just keeps getting bigger, doesn't it?"

Sabre nodded, "Sounds like one of the salvage ops I use to do on old factories. Always seems easy until you get into actual planning."

Jet sighed at sat back in her chair. "We're going to need a lot of help,"

A cough interrupted them.

"Well that depends on whether you're willing to wait for it,"

Everyone turned to face the brunette newcomer in the Stellvian staff uniform.

"Well, you three haven't exactly been quiet, have you?" she smiled at them, eyes glinting behind her glasses.

The trio shared a nervous glance.

"I was expecting someone to notice." Sabre declared.

Sierra threw the avatar a dirty look, as if to say 'No you weren't'.

Sabre just gave Sierra a look that implied a facepalm.

"Well," Jet swallowed a lump, "We're just working on something right now, for when peace talks break down,"

"Well," the Stellvian said, "Just a friendly reminder that anyone who breaks rank on Firefall might find it....difficult....to do business in Fenspace afterwards,"

Jet glanced at her girlfriend, "We never even thought about it,"

"No... you didn't," Sierra snarked back at her.

~***~

EXFOR Staging Platform, Earth-Luna L2 November 24, 2016 (Event +5 days)

The station at L2 was paltry compared to others in cislunar space, a thing of girders, wires and simple canisters. It wasn't designed to be the hub of a huge Convention-wide diplomatic and –

more than likely – military effort. Still, the Soviet platform was where the ships were, and as Mal Fnord was prone to say, needs must as the devil drives. Mal stood in the platform's observation deck, watching the Fen embassy to the surface come together. Anchored to the platform, the GCU *Laika* took on supplies, spotlights playing over the blue, green and gold paint. Several dozen kilometers away, the *Grover's Corners* received a steady stream of Roughrider transports.

"We do travel in style, don't we?" Ben Rhodes asked from behind Mal, making him jump a little.

Mal gave Ben a sidelong look. "Seven elephants. And what are you doing here? You should be on the *Corners*."

"Annika's handling the move. I just wanted to come in, check my orders... and say good luck." Ben stuck out his hand. "I know I'm going to need it more than you, but we could both use some."

"We make our own luck," Mal objected, but shook on it anyway. "As for your orders, I've got an addendum."

"Really?" Ben asked.

"Yes, really," said Mal. "Once your initial mission is done and the *Corners* is over the Karman line, I want you – and *only* you, not Gina, not any of the other Roughriders – to break off and head for Utah."

Ben blinked. "Utah? Why in Skuld's name do you want me in Utah?"

"You're going to meet with a ranking member of the Latter-Day Saints, convince him that we're not devil worshippers, and then tell him that we're the best hope his people have of living to see 2020."

Ben stared at Mal. "You're serious."

"Dead serious. We need to nip this in the bud, Ben. Otherwise a lot of people are going to die."

"I'll... see what I can do."

"You do that."

"Any other surprises you want to spring on me?" Ben asked.

"Otherwise?" replied Mal. "Nope. Talk to Featherston, try and get him to see he has no friends in the world and he's not going to win any if he keeps it up."

“Oh, this will be fun,” Ben grinned. “Of all the Mundanes out there, I’m going to enjoy freaking this one.”

“Focus, Rhodes,” Mal said. “If you freak him too hard, he’ll strike before we’re ready.”

“Right, right, scare him but not so hard he declares war.”

“And *don’t* take this too lightly. Featherston’s not some Mafioso or three-bit drug pusher. He’s the most dangerous guy we’ve ever tried to make a run on. He’s a lot of things, but stupid isn’t one of them. If he sees a weakness he can exploit, he’ll exploit it.” Mal said the last looking over Rhodes’ shoulder. Ben half-turned, glancing back and seeing his wife Gina and their daughter Mayonaka sightseeing out the window.

Ben turned back and gave Mal a look. “You honestly don’t think he’d...” he trailed off, leaving the implication open.

Mal shook his head. “I don’t know, but... just be careful, all right?”

~***~

Philadelphia Municipal Airfield, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania November 25, 1940

The air was full of anticipation. Ever since the night of the 18th, when the fog had come down and left a changed world in its wake, the people of the United States were confused, frightened but above all *curious* about the brave new world they’d landed in. The wireless broadcasts from outer space made the people all the more curious; rumors of strange encounters with stranger things were breaking out all over. Finally, President Smith had decided to meet these rumors head on. He’d invited representatives from the mysterious Fenspace Convention to Philadelphia, for a friendly chat.

He’d done it on national wireless, too, so there would be no secrecy, and the public buzzed with excitement: the Mysterons were coming!

Flora Blackford adjusted her coat and waited, alongside the President and a gaggle of General Staff officers, for the Fen delegation to arrive.

The President and his staff had had a briefing on the Fen from the other American – and it was so hard not to try and capitalize ‘other’ – ambassador. It was just one surreal moment out of a week that couldn’t have been imagined by the wildest pulp authors.

"The Fen are different," he said, this incredibly green young man who'd apparently been some junior State Department functionary before the world changed underneath them. "They're not green monsters from Mars – or at least most of them aren't," he added, which didn't inspire confidence in President Smith's group. "We've had our differences over the years, but the one thing we've found is that they *do* want to help. It's just that their definition of 'help' can be a bit... odd."

"I see," Smith said, not really seeing but willing to go along with the assessment. In the perilous situation the United States had found itself, even odd help was better than none. "What can you tell us about these diplomats they're sending?"

"They're both faction leaders. Mr. Marsden is – was – is one of our leading industrialists, runs a major mining operation among other things. He's a stalwart American patriot, though his personal politics might cause some friction." Flora groaned inwardly at this. *Even in another universe, the capitalists managed to rise to the top of the heap.* "General Fnord," the diplomat went on, "commands a smaller faction, more openly militarized than Marsden's. Aside from that, he's also got more overt and covert power among the Fen than Marsden, so expect him to lead the discussion."

"I understand," said Smith. "Thank you for letting us know this, son."

"My pleasure, Mr. President."

~***~

After that perfunctory briefing, Flora had arranged for some more research on her own, courtesy of her son Joshua's collection of pulp magazines and novels. All of them had lurid covers, usually involving odd-looking monsters threatening half-naked women, and were filled with square jawed men being ridiculously noble and heroic. It was, by Flora's estimation, all very juvenile stuff.

"Still," she murmured, "these people seem to have made it work as a civilization."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Blackford, did you say something?" asked the Navy man she'd ended up standing next to.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she replied. "Just thinking out loud, is all. I was thinking about our guests."

The Navy man grinned. "There's a lot of that going around these days. I'm looking forward to grilling some of these Fen people on how they stay alive in space."

Flora's eyebrows rose. "Are you speaking professionally, Mr...?"

The man had the grace to look abashed. "Heinlein, ma'am, Commander Bob Heinlein. And I suppose I *am* speaking professionally, though not as a naval officer." He shrugged. "I used to write the stuff, you see."

"Oh," said Flora, enlightened.

"Yes, ma'am." Heinlein paused. "It's an honor to speak to you, by the way. I was an admirer of your husband, worked for his campaign back in '32."

"Really? I didn't think a General Staff officer would have approved of Hosea."

"I was a green Lieutenant out on an invalid discharge back then. They only reactivated me when some admiral noticed a magazine with my name on it and put two and two together. Guess they're hoping my 'experience' making stuff up for the pulps translates into understanding these Mysterion people."

"You shouldn't call them that," Flora chided. Heinlein shrugged.

"They're the ones who started that flabble," he said, and Flora couldn't disagree with that. Heinlein glanced at his watch. "They seem to be running fashionably late," he noted. "They said they'd be here right about now and I don't see-

Whatever Heinlein was about to say was cut off, as a terrible CRACK tore through the sky. Everybody in the waiting welcoming party, members of the press and bystanders alike all reflexively flinched. One distinguished general threw himself onto the dry grass.

"What was *that!?*" cried a reporter. "Are they bombing us?"

The echoes of the crack died away, replaced by a rumbling sound, like an avalanche. Whatever it was, the sound was a distant cry from the droning sound of a propeller.

"It has to be nearby," someone said.

"There!" someone else said, and there it was.

Coming high out of the west was an aeroplane the likes of which none of the people in Philadelphia had ever seen. A broad, flat triangle painted in garish colors swept down across the plain. Instead of propellers, the craft sported two large pods embedded in the wings, each topped with a cap that glowed a fierce blue.

"*Shema yisrael, adonai eloheinu adonai ehad,*" Flora whispered, all she could say in the face of something so utterly alien.

“Amazing,” Heinlein muttered. “I wonder how they do it?” The man's commanding officer however wasn't nearly so calm.

“Good Lord,” the admiral said, eyes wide as saucers. “That monster is as wide as the *Remembrance* is long!”

The gigantic aircraft swept down over the American delegation, close enough that they could read the ship's name ('GCU LAIKA') and see the device on the wings (a red and white flower, standing out against the splashes of green, blue and gold) before it gained altitude and moved on towards the city.

“Sonofabitch!” One of the generals attending the arrival snarled. “They're moving off to attack the city!”

“Steady, general,” the president warned.

“But sir!”

“Look, damn it! It's not attacking, it's turning!”

And so it was. The ship made a long, slow, majestic turn, like a runner doing a victory lap, or a new ocean liner making a show cruise around the harbor. All around the city, people stopped and looked up in amazement and a little fear. They'd all heard the Mysteron transmission, and despite the official denials they all wondered what that meant. Now it was clear; the Mysterons weren't only real, they were *here*.

Speaking for herself, her constituents and her country, Flora Blackford only hoped they came in peace.

The ship – *Laika* – approached the airfield, slowing to not much faster than a brisk walking pace. She swept over the runway, turning towards the place where the welcoming party stood. *Laika* inched over until she came to a complete stop not a hundred feet away from the awed bystanders. Then, with deliberate slowness, she dropped to the ground, landing legs extended. When the legs touched earth, the rumbling noise stopped, the bright blue glow coming from the engine pods dimming until the bystanders could see what looked like giant fan blades twirling inside globes of blue glass.

~***~

“All stop, engines parked. Welcome to Bizarro-USA, circa 1940.”

“Thank you, Major, that was excellent flying. Diplomatic party meet at the main hatch in five, and everybody remember where we've parked.”

~***~

The reception party watched the ship's hatch open, and a long gangway extend down to the ground. With the ship's engines idle, silence reigned on the field. Despite assurances from other nations, nobody knew what the Fen would look like. Were they still human? Alien monsters? Some sort of robot?

Flora Blackford, in the course of her 'research' into the matter, had conjured up two possibilities – either the Fen would be square-jawed, bronzed heroes like the ones from Joshua's pulps, or they'd be green, bald and bulging eyes, with four arms and carrying rayguns, again like Joshua's pulps. As the Fen party emerged from the ship, she was struck by how far off the mark her speculations were. The two leading the small group out of *Laika* were downright average specimens of humanity.

The first man was tall and broad-shouldered, with an aristocratic face framed by close-cropped dark brown hair. He walked with a confident stride, eyes flicking back and forth at the assembled group warily, like he expected a gunman or a wild animal to jump out of the crowd at any second. The other was shorter and more average in build, his bearded, weatherbeaten face less hard-edged than his companion. The two women accompanying them, however, fit the exotic image Flora had constructed in her mind. Behind the taller man walked a small, pale-skinned woman with blue hair, and behind the shorter a tall Indian woman glided forward, a calculating look in her dark eyes.

The odd little party stopped directly in front of the president. The shorter man snapped off a salute. "Mr. President," he said, grey eyes twinkling behind half-moon glasses. "General Malaclypse Fnord, Soviet Air Force. We're your diplomatic party. May I introduce Mr. Christopher Marsden," he gestured to the taller man, "chief executive of Greenwood, and our aide de camps, Captain Weatheral," a gesture to the Indian, and then to the blue-haired woman: "and Ms. Ayanami."

There was a moment – perhaps a little more awkward than it should've been – while the two delegations sized each other up. Then somebody coughed, and President Smith jolted into action. "General, Mr. Marsden, welcome to the United States." The president paused. "Forgive us, but your arrival was a little overwhelming."

Fnord's eyes widened in surprise. As far as Flora could tell, the surprise seemed genuine. "It was? Oh *dear*." Flora was more than a little puzzled. Fnord's demeanor was unlike any general – or any military man – she'd ever met. He seemed more like an absent-minded schoolteacher than somebody responsible for the sort of power *Laika* projected. "I really must apologize, Mr. President. The idea was to *impress* you, not overwhelm."

"Oh, believe me General, we were *very* impressed." Smith's voice was jolly, but everybody in

earshot could tell the bonhomie was forced at best.

“Ah, yes? Well, good, good.” Fnord muttered. “Again, my apologies. We didn't mean to frighten anybody.”

Flora couldn't resist the question. “So what would you have done had you meant to frighten us?” she asked.

Fnord peered at her, the absent-mindedness vanishing like fog on a sunny day. “Ah, Madame Blackford,” he said with a sharp-edged smile. “You should see what we sent to Richmond.”

Even though the day was fairly warm for November in Pennsylvania, and for all that she was wearing a heavy coat, Flora shivered.

Richmond, Virginia
November 25, 1940

(Grover's Corners and her diplomatic team arrive, to a great deal more shock and awe.
Something like: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xqBGuh-6aVU> ?)

The arrival of the Mysterons was heralded by an unexpected solar eclipse. A calm, clear November afternoon suddenly cast into twilight did little to ease the dread forming in Freedom Party stalwarts' hearts. Dogs began barking, and on the edges of town, roosters crowed.

The unease grew stronger as the shadow blocking out the sun grew larger and larger, until the naked eye could see the signs of someone's handiwork on a massive sphere. A portal of some sort opened like a slow-motion camera shutter and a sinister black craft like an elongated manta ray slowly emerged. When it was fully revealed as separate from the looming sphere, it paused in midair before seeming to disappear in a crash of thunder, streaking across the sky in a circle of Richmond.

Having made its scouting pass, the Mysteron craft hovered menacingly along Bank Street at a pace reminiscent of some holiday parade, before rotating on its yaw axis. It showed off its sleek and lethal lines to the assembled delegates in front of the Capitol building, before gently setting down, barely disturbing the dry leaves scattered about.

part the third: where bzns becomes srs

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
November 26, 1940 (Event + 6 days)

Something was wrong. The thought had been nagging Flora Blackford all through the ride back

to Powel House. She couldn't figure out why, though: the two Fen envoys had been nothing but gracious during the trip. Their aides had been somewhat less so, but then that was expected of aides, really; theirs was to be neither seen nor heard.

Still, the nagging sensation remained, worrying at her like a dog with a bone. It wasn't until they'd reached the presidential residence that it struck her like a thunderbolt.

He had known her name.

By all the information that they'd had, from the other-US and from the other-US's allies, this was a completely different world, one where the War of Secession had turned out differently. So how, in the name of all that was holy, did General Fnord know *her name*? The realization stopped her cold in the doorway, long enough for the general's aide to run right into her.

Flora stumbled, and almost made an inglorious landing on Powel House's front stoop when her descent was stopped. "Thank you, Captain...?" she trailed off, having forgotten the woman's name in her moment of epiphany.

"Weatheral, mum, Athene Weatheral, but most folks call me Tina." Weatheral's voice was soft, with a strong English accent. "Are you sure you're all right, mum?"

"Yes, yes," Flora said. "I was... distracted. It occurred to me that I hadn't been introduced to General Fnord, yet he knew my name."

Weatheral looked pained. "The cheeky bastard overplayed his hand," she muttered, then mustered a slight smile. "Don't worry about it, mum, Mal and Mr. Marsden will explain everything."

"Mal," Flora echoed. "That's an awfully informal way for a subordinate to talk about her, er, commander."

Weatheral shrugged. "Us Reds, we're a pretty informal group in a lot of ways, dictatorship of the proletariat and all that, you know?"

That was a tidbit Flora hadn't heard from the briefing. "Reds? You're Reds?"

"Well, *we're* Reds. Kind of, anyway, we're sort of a mix of Goldman syndicalists, social democrats and anarcho-transhumanists. Not that that means a whole lot to you," Tina added. "We like to call ourselves Reds, though; especially since it gets the wind up guys like Marsden," She finished the sentence with an impish smile, and Flora couldn't help but laugh a little.

"All right, Captain," she said, chuckling. "I'll let your boss explain things."

~***~

“The ambassador from the Sandwich Is - excuse me, Hawaii – was very informative about the world outside our borders, but he danced around a few things. At the same time, you tipped off Congresswoman Blackford” Mal suppressed a wince “that there was something unusual going on. Now, gentlemen, before we discuss anything further I think it’s time you put that card on the table.” Smith leaned back and gave the two envoys a steady look.

Mal looked at Chris. “Well,” he said, “should we do the world-shattering revelation?”

“I don’t see how we’ve got much choice,” Chris replied.

“Hm. Well then.” Mal reached down and, after a moment of rummaging, pulled a thick paperback book out and handed it to the President. “Everything we know, we know because of these.”

Smith looked at the cover. On it, three indistinct figures stood on a street covered with Freedom Party banners. The title read *The Victorious Opposition*. Brows lifted, he turned to the back cover.

Harry Turtledove’s acclaimed alternate history series began with a single question: What if the South had won the Civil War? Now, seventy years have passed since the first War Between the States. The North American continent is locked in a battle of politics, economies, and moralities. In a world that has already felt the soul-shattering blow of the Great War, North America is the powder keg that could ignite another global conflict—complete with a new generation of killing machines.

Al Smith felt his mouth go dry as he looked at the story synopsis on the back of the book. “This is impossible,” he said. “Impossible,” he repeated, his voice gaining strength.

“I know,” replied Mal. “I don’t blame you if you don’t believe it. I’m not sure I believe it most days.” He shrugged. “But as Galileo would say, *eppur si muove*.”

“It’s just...” Smith shook his head. “It’s our *lives*, laid out here for other people’s amusement...”

“Think of it this way, Mr. President,” Rei Ayanami cut into the conversation. “What you’re reading is history, and what’s past is past. You can learn from it, but you shouldn’t dwell on it.”

Smith peered at the tiny woman. “That’s oddly perceptive from someone so young, miss.” Rei favored him with a tiny smile.

“It’s something I’ve had to deal with,” she said.

"History, eh?" Smith said, looking at the book with a little awe. "It's one thing to wonder about how history will judge a man, but to read that judgment yourself... well." He turned his gaze from the book to Mal. "There are more of these?"

Mal nodded. "Quite a few." This time he pulled a thin metal object out his case. Smith blinked at the appearance of the gadget, all chrome and white Bakelite. Mal placed the pad on his desk. "This has all the books pre-loaded on it. The controls are pretty easy to figure out, and it has a charge that should last a month or so."

Smith eyed the pad a little warily. "And this covers?" he asked.

"The entire series covers the Second Mexican War, the Great War, the interwar period and the Second Great War," Mal said. A pause. "If we were to use the books as a history, then we'd be in the last chapters of the first book I handed you. Everything after that... doesn't really matter."

Flora could no longer contain her curiosity. "Why not?"

"You're here," Chris said. "If you were where you belong, then those books would still apply. But since you and the CSA are in *our* world now, what happens in those books won't happen."

"Or at least," Mal chimed in, "we're going to do out damndest to keep those events from happening."

"There's more books after this, but they are no longer relevant due to, well, *us*, and the books before would read like historical fiction to you."

"And this is?" <puppet character> asked, pointing at the military aide.

"Lieutenant Commander Robert Heinlein, at your service." Bob didn't know what he was expecting, but the sudden worshipful gaze was disconcerting.

~***~

Owner's Office, Odyssey **November 25, 2016**

"Dad, I know we aren't in charge of this part of the operation, so I thought you should be the one to make this proposal to the people who are." Kohran spread some old-fashioned blueprints out over Noah's desk. "While we're reprogramming some of the older spy satellites the USAF and the NSA had in orbit so that FIREFALL can use them, we could add this to at least some of them."

Noah studied the plans. "Kohran..." After a moment, he went on. "First, this is highly illegal - there are treaties forbidding this sort of thing. Second, we don't have the capability to retrofit

enough satellites before Featherston makes his move, either when the books say he does or earlier because we've frightened him so much that he thinks he has nothing left to lose. Third, it would be hypocritical of me to emplace weapons after telling everyone at the Convention to wait. And finally, 'crowbar' is supposed to be a *nickname* for that ammunition."

"I know, I know, I know, and we can buy actual crowbars from Hephaestus without it looking too suspicious. But we may *need* this. Are we going to do this?"

"I'll ask Mal."

~***~

Canberra, Australia

November 25, 2016 (Event + 6 days)

Maico Tange sat at her favorite little cafe in the heart of the Capital Territory, going over her latest report and wondering when, exactly, the multiverse decided to stop making sense. It might have been when the group of people Maico knew damn well were *not real* decided to make a stopover in Fenspace. The report on *that* little adventure had thrown Infinity into a tizzy, with whole sections of how-we-knew-the-world-worked getting thrown out and rewritten.

This latest event on Gernsback-2 was probably going rewrite the entire book on parachronics.

Dear Infinity, she thought. Turns out that everything we thought we knew about parachronics was wrong. Oops. Don't tell Drs. Williams and Khor, they'll be far too smug. And as far as I can tell, nobody here was responsible for it. Please send backup. Love, Maico.

"Having trouble there, missy?" Maico looked up from her laptop. Standing in front of her was a shortish man not much older than she was. His broad Chinese features held a slight frown that belied his genial Ocker accent. Maico knew the accent was a little *too* broad for the man who used it, in order to hide an accent that didn't quite fit into the known categories of local English.

"Oh, sit down already, Chang. And buy me a drink, please. I could use one."

Mohammed Chang, Maico's opposite number from the mysterious Centrum, slid into the chair across from her. "Of course," he said. "This place has a way a driving people to drink." He flagged a waitress down with practiced ease and placed a drink order. "So," he said as the waitress walked off. "What are you telling your superiors about this latest incident?"

Maico's eyes narrowed. "What are you telling your superiors?" she asked. This was an old game of theirs, ever since they'd first encountered each other at the same cafe years ago.

"I have informed my superior, the esteemed Grade Five Goldstein," Chang said, "that this worldline has once again confounded our understanding of parachronic physics, that a mere Grade 3 field agent like myself hasn't got the slightest fucking clue what's going on, and that Secundus - excuse me, Infinity - feels much the same way."

"Well... yeah," Maico sighed. "That's what my reports have been saying too." She looked around at the busy cafe. "The natives seem to be taking it well, though."

Chang snorted. "They're putting on a brave face, but you can feel the tension," he said. "Everybody here is on edge; they're worried that they'll be next."

"Do you think they will be?" Maico was honestly curious about this, to say nothing about the higher-ups back on Homeline.

"Like I told my superiors, I haven't a clue. So, we wait to see what the next shoe to drop is. In the meantime, eat drink and be merry, for tomorrow..." Chang shrugged expansively.

"Well, I suppose. I suspect that the only thing *we'll* get to do is watch and wait for orders." Chang nodded at Maico's wisdom as the waitress returned with a pitcher of beers. As Maico took a long pull on her beer, she thought about the madness that was Gernsback-2. *It might be worth mentioning in the next dispatch that the first person to find the missing United States might get a lot of everlasting gratitude from the Gernsbackians.*

Taking a drink of his own beer, Mohammed Chang was thinking along much the same lines. *The Forum needs to be informed, he thought, and we need more people here. It's past time to set up a proper embassy.*

~***~

(Notes on the organization of the Fen response: This will take place (mostly) in the above part, but since that's so crowded with notes & other crap I'm putting it here for clarity. Anyway.

The way I'm seeing it so far, there are two big organizational blocks to the fen response, or "Operations" in the common fenspace parlance. The first is Operation Retrieve, which is Noah's effort to locate the missing USA and/or reverse the effect. *Consensus in the 0.1a version appeared to be that this will not bear fruit until the second operation is close to completion, if it ever does. Any "assistance" in this Operation from Nanohaverse-type interdimensional troubleshooters will find the FTL's USA in TL-191's Earth, and will need to work their way to Fenspace.* The second is Operation Firefall, which is the Convention/UN effort to deal with the internal problems of the incident zone. For the most part, the story from here out will follow the Firefall group.

Firefall itself is broken up into smaller operations, or "Cases" (for ease of picking stuff to write

about). So far I've got a couple of Cases to work with:

- * Case CLAUSEWITZ is the Fen delegations to the IZ.
- * Case TECHNICOLOR DREAMCOAT is the Roughriders mission to Utah, in an attempt to convince the Mormons their destiny lies elsewhere.
- * Case MONGOOSE is the anti-Draka operation, once the snakeheads show themselves. (Toying with the idea that VF's run in with Drakan gunrunners is the first skirmish with the snakes. So when Fox Savage gets back to Luna - hey congrats on not dying, the new biomod and GF look good on you, and here's your new job...)
- * Case DIANA, the main hearts-and-minds effort attached for propaganda purposes, mostly BBI and Supers doing their thing. (May put AC on this one. Moo hoo ha ha ha)

- * Project THISTLEDOWN is the Operation Retrieve main project once they figure out where the US went; building a "rescue ship." Personally, I vote using Juno as the ship - 'cause I loved EON. %) ETC sometime in the late 2020s.

...and more will show up as people get inspired or whatever.

Powel House

25 November 1940/2016 (Event + 6 days)

(just some dialogue that's been in my head forEVER that I need to get out before it kills me)

<President Smith> "Well, gentlemen, what can you offer us in the event of hostilities."

<Mal> "Air superiority is the big one; there is nothing the Confederate Air Force has that can match our aerospace assets. Aside from that... you have to understand, Mr. President, that the entire population of the Convention is a little smaller than the population of Philadelphia. In terms of troops and armor, our assets are powerful but extremely limited."

<Smith> *disappointed but trying not to show it* "Is that all?"

<Mal> *gallic shrug* "Well, if worse comes to worse, I suppose we can start throwing rocks at the Confederates."

* Marsden grins, in a fashion that's probably supposed to be sly and knowing but comes off like a poker n00b who just hit a royal flush.

Richmond, Virginia

November 28, 1940

Clarence Potter examined the object on his desk with a dubious eye. It was small enough to fit in a man's hand, matte black on all sides and very light. It was also scorched and partially melted along one edge, as if someone had taken a blowtorch to it. On the back a plate read *Please Return To Mr. Jacob Featherston, The Gray House, Richmond* in neat lettering.

“And you say that this was found near the James, right?”

The lieutenant who'd brought in the object nodded. “The Freedom Party man who gave it to me said he'd been walking his dog near the riverbank when he found it. Said it fell out of a clear blue sky with no aeroplanes around.”

“Out of a clear blue sky,” Potter repeated. “Lots of things falling out of the sky these days, Lieutenant.”

The lieutenant shivered. “Yes, sir.” The memory of the gigantic whatsit the Mysterons or Martians or whatever the hell they were had arrived in cast a long shadow. Half the city was traumatized by the experience. “In any case sir,” he continued, “since this is marked for the President, the Party fella gave it to me, to make sure it isn't a trap.”

Potter nodded. “Good thinking. Is it?”

“Bomb squad doesn't think so, sir. Or at least it's not explosive. We opened it up and... well, see for yourself, sir.” The lieutenant picked up the object, pried it open like a clam's shell and showed the inside to Potter. The interior of the device consisted of two grilles on either end of the two halves, and a bright green button.”

Potter inspected the object with a gimlet eye. “Looks like a telephone handset.”

“Yes sir. We haven't pushed the button yet, sir.”

“Well then, there's no time like the present. Hand it here, Lieutenant.” Potter held out his hand. The lieutenant looked dubious, but reluctantly handed the phone over. Potter pressed the button and put the phone to his ear.

To his surprise, he could hear the phone ringing on the other end. On the second ring, it picked up. “Hello?” asked a pleasant and genial voice.

“Hello?”

“Am I speaking with President Featherston?” The voice had a strange accent, halfway between Georgia and Louisiana but horribly drawn out and exaggerated.

“You are not. This is Colonel Clarence Potter. Who is this?”

“Potter, Potter.. oh yes!” The voice on the the other end sounded oddly pleased. “The man who destroyed Philadelphia! Splendid! You have Mr. Featherston's ear, yes? Please deliver the telephone to the President, and all will be explained.”

Potter blinked. *The man who destroyed Philadelphia?* Clarence Potter was no more immune to flights of fancy than any other man, and Lord knew that every man in the Confederate States had fantasized about wrecking Philadelphia at one point or another, but the man on the other end of the phone made it sound as if it was a done deal.

"I'm not taking this thing anywhere near the president," he rallied, "unless I have some assurances that this isn't a trick. Who are you?"

"My, my, Colonel," the voice replied. "I understand your suspicion, but there's no need to be rude. My name is Ingolfsson, and I represent a group of interested parties who have been watching the situation. We happen to be great admirers of the Confederate States, and we think you have... potential. We'd like to discuss that potential with Mr. Featherston."

"That's all well and good, Mr. Ingolfsson," Potter said, "but it'll take time before I can bring this to the president's attention."

"Of course, take all the time you need, Colonel. Just remember one thing." Ingolfsson's voice changed from genial to ice-cold. "The Fen are aligning themselves with your enemies as we speak. You *will* need our help when all is said and done."

The connection closed, and Clarence Potter was left staring at a phone that fell out of the sky, the other end connected to God alone knew what. "Not a trap," he muttered, thinking that not all traps had to involve explosives or guns. "Swell."

Drake's Rock, Sol-Neptune L5

November 28, 2016

Wilf Ingolfsson hung up and looked thoughtfully at the mural covering the habitat wall. Like most of the murals in Drake's Rock, it showed a pleasant pastoral scene of *servus* happily toiling away in the fields while *drakensis* went about their daily routines. A scene to soothe the soul and serve as a motivator for any proper servant of the Archon.

The door chimed. "Come in," Ingolfsson said. In walked Thomas von Schrackenberg, Ingolfsson's relief for the contact project. Like Ingolfsson, von Schrackenberg had biomodded to get as close to the *drakensis* genotype as possible; tall, blonde and athletic, possessed of greater than normal strength and intelligence.

"How'd it go?" asked von Schrackenberg.

"We finally got a hit," Wilf said, "but it wasn't Featherston. It was his lackey, the one from the books that kept trying to kill him but was too useful to dispose of. Still, as lackeys go this one's pretty important. I figure we'll be in contact with Featherston in a week, two tops."

“That’s great news!” von Schrackenberg exclaimed. “Have you informed the Archon?”

“I only just got off the phone,” Wilf protested. “And you need to take over in case they call back.” He got up and von Schrackenberg took his place.

Wilf exited the contact room and moved down the corridor towards the lift to the Archon’s chamber. Around him swirled the nucleus of the Final Society, other *drakensis* biomods combined with the lesser forms of feral Turnerites and other like-minded “refugees” brought into the Rock to build the Domination’s numbers. Ingolfsson viewed these ferals with no small distaste; many of the Turnerites in particular were below the Draka’s high standards for *servus*, let alone Janissaries or *drakensis*. Still, with only a small core of true Draka at hand, the Archon insisted on having soil with which to grow the Final Society.

He made his way through the mass of humanity without major incident and entered the lift. The doors snapped shut and Wilf felt himself plunge down into the heart of Drake’s Rock. The Archon’s chamber was the largest opening they’d carved into the nameless Trojan asteroid, an extravagance but one worthy of both the Archon and the Domination. It was also the safest place in the Rock, under seventy kilometers of rock and ice harder than concrete. From here the Archon and his chosen Strategos commanded the forces of the Domination.

The lift door opened and Wilf stepped out into the chamber. As befit the Draka warrior ethos, the chamber was decorated spartanly, with only a few tapestries and war trophies lining the walls. At the far end of the chamber the Archon sat on his high chair in front of a massive desk, both items made of precious, hard-won Earth hardwood. Wilf marched straight up to the desk, saluted and bowed. “Service to the State,” he said.

“Glory to the Race,” responded the Archon. “What news have you to report?”

“Suh,” Wilf said, “We’ve had a breakthrough in Project Contact. One of the phones finally reached a man of influence in the Confederate government.” He paused. “The man’s name is Clarence Potter, and suh, he’s a Named Character.”

“Tyr’s balls!” The Archon’s exclamation echoed in the chamber. “That *is* good news, Citizen. A Named Character on the third try. Very well done. Now, how long before we’re talking to Featherston?”

“I would estimate no less than two weeks, perhaps less. Potter’s a suspicious man, but we’ve got plenty to tempt him with. Suh.”

“Temptation,” said a low voice behind the Archon, “is our best weapon. Though I’ve got others.” From behind the chair slinked a buxom blonde woman, who then proceeded to perch on the armrest. Ingolfsson did his best to restrain his disgust at the display. The woman – and he used

the term loosely – who had the Archon’s ear wasn’t *drakensis*, nor was she Draka. Rumors going around the station suggested that the mysterious Citizen Agatha Clay wasn’t even *human*, but instead some sort of alien or Yankee robot. The idea of the Archon... *consorting* with a Yankee machine was almost too much for Ingolfsson to bear.

Clay seemed to pick up on Ingolfsson’s issues. She gave the *drakensis* a hard look, eyes narrowed. “You don’t agree?” she asked, voice sweet. Wilf sweated; while as a *drakensis* he could take her apart in a fair fight, Clay wasn’t known to fight fair. Worse, if she took a dislike to him, and put it in the Archon’s ear that Wilfred Ingolfsson was a traitor to the Race, his life would be short and full of torment. If he was lucky.

Knowing all this, Ingolfsson replied the only way he could. “Ma’am,” he said, “I agree wholeheartedly.” Clay’s eyes stayed narrow, but she gave an approving nod. The Archon, who had been watching this little drama with a smirk, waved Ingolfsson off. Wilf took the hint, saluted once more and ducked out of the chamber as fast as he could move.

The Archon watched him leave. “You know,” he said once the lift doors closed again, “that he’ll just spread more rumors.”

“Who cares?” Clay said with a dismissive sniff. “You’re the Archon of the Domination. All your *loyal* followers,” she added extra emphasis on the word, “would die for you a hundred times. And even if dissent spreads, who’s going to move against you, your Strategos and the Janissaries? Nobody else on this rock has the balls to try and depose you.”

“Still,” the Archon mused, “this dissent isn’t good for the Domination or the Race.”

“It’ll go away once they’ve got something to do other than hide,” Clay said. “You said it yourself, Eric: the Draka must conquer or die. Coming out here to the Rock was wise when there weren’t many Draka, but now it’s time to conquer.” She leaned in close, putting her hands on the Archon’s shoulders. “And with my genius coupled with your... *innate*... superiority, you’ll get your prize.”

“Oh, I will, will I?”

“A year from now you’ll own the Confederate States and start turning it into a *real* nation, not this half-assed murder machine Featherston’s got now.” Clay leaned in even closer, her face almost touching the Archon. “After that,” she whispered, “the world, the Convention, *everything* will fall under your Yoke, and there’s nothing dear daddy or his bourgeois buddies can do to stop it. It’s history, Eric.”

“And you can’t fight history,” Archon Eric von Shrackenburg finished. Clay smiled, and kissed him.

interlude minus one: where a screwy situation becomes even more so

(ed. note: This immediate next bit is a revision of a scene written for the 0.1a version by Rob.)

Main Operations Center, *Stellvia* Station
29 November 2016, 08:31 UTC

For the first time in days, Noah Scott was sitting behind his own desk. *It's good to be home*, he thought. The Convention he'd started on Odyssey was necessary to show both Fen and 'Dane that some sort of positive action was happening. But as far as Noah was concerned, it was a distraction from the *real* work of finding the missing United States.

Any further thoughts along that line quickly fled when Jake Hansen requested his boss's attention. "Sir," he said.

Noah heard the undertone in Hansen's voice. "What's wrong now, Duty Officer?"

"We've got another DQS alert on Ring B, Pod 37. It was so faint that it almost didn't trip."

"Seal the pod," Noah ordered. "I'm going to check it out."

"Already sealed, sir." A pause. "I'll have a security team waiting for you outside the pod."

"I don't think that's necessary, Jake. I am a big boy, you know."

If Hansen was persuaded by Noah's argument, he gave no sign. "Sir," he said, "the last time this happened, you had backup. I'd be failing in my duty if I let you go out alone this morning. You've got a family to come back to."

"I know," replied Noah. "That's why I have to know if this is a threat to Leda and Helen."

Ring B, Residential Pod 37, *Stellvia* Station
29 November 2016, 08:32 UTC

Maico Tange was having the exact opposite of a good day.

This was supposed to be a simple intelligence-gathering mission. Show up, find out what - if anything - the indigs had figured out about the event, and relay the message home. She'd accomplished everything; getting to Odyssey was easy enough with her cover story and the emergency Convention. Intel was easy enough to gather from the people in the bars. And then back to Stellvia, load up the message pod and send it off.

And then the damned door slammed shut and wouldn't open. *So much for having good intel*, Maico thought sourly. Apparently the indigs had something that could detect parachronics, and they'd tied it into Stellvia's security system.

This was a hell of a way to find out about that sort of capability.

Maico sighed. Nothing to do now but wait. She briefly considered suicide, but Maico felt she still had far too much to do with her life. Besides, if she kicked it here and now, the mission might be unsalvageable.

The wait wasn't very long. The outer door opened and revealed - to Maico's complete lack of surprise - the station's owner with a squad of station security at his back. Noah Scott blinked audibly. "Of all the people I thought might be in here," he said, "I never would have expected to see *you*." He tapped a few commands into the airlock controls. "I'm going to unlock the door, but I warn you now: try to overpower me, and the whole pod depressurizes."

No other way out. "Yes, of course, Mr. Scott." Maico replied.

"What were you doing a minute ago, Ms. Tange?" Noah asked, quite pleasantly if you didn't notice the gun in his hand.

Maico shrugged. "Just sending off a report." Which was true enough. "The folks at Hawaii Public Radio asked for a report on the Convention." Which was *also* true enough, and Maico hoped that it would be enough to convince Scott...

Noah leveled the gun at Maico's head. "Don't lie to me, Ms. Tange," he said.

(...)

(need more in here to get Noah from "paranoid SOB" to "trusting the woman who can get his wife and daughter clear of the free-fire zone")

"Does this... 'banestorm' usually affect so large an area?"

"No, Mr. Scott. Or at least neither I nor anybody I've met has ever seen something of this scale." Maico tilted her head inquisitively. "But I have a question for you. How did you spot me?"

Noah smiled. "*Sore wa himitsu desu.*"

"I didn't know you spoke Japanese."

"I don't. But there are a few phrases that come in handy."

(...)

"One last question, Ms. Tange: Who do you work for?"

"White Star Trading," she answered. She wasn't being completely dishonest; a few of her reports did end up on desks in White Star's headquarters back home.

Noah brought his pistol back up. "Oh, Maico ... and you were cooperating so well, too. I'm a successful businessman heavily involved in trade, remember? I know that there's no trading group called White Star." He lowered his pistol again, confusing her slightly. "At least, not in this universe. Although if you had said you were working for Paralabs, I might have believed you right off." Maico blanched, and Noah surprised a grin. *Jackpot*. "All right, Ms. Tange. You tell your bosses at Infinity that this worldline is officially off-limits to meddlers. Unless."

"Unless?"

"If Infinity wants to keep operating in Fenspace, then you're going to give me something I want."

"And that is?" Maico asked, feeling another cold knot forming in her stomach.

"Safe harbor."

~***~

Owner's Office, Stellvia
29 November 2016, 14:19 UTC

"I wonder what stats I have..."

Safety looked up at Noah. "Pardon, sir?"

"Oh, it's nothing really important. I was just musing on transfictionality."

Safety nodded, then blinked, then spoke in a different voice. "Noah, stop dwelling on the past!" Then she blinked again.

Noah stared at his assistant in shock for a moment. Then he took a breath, held it for a five-count, then exhaled. "Safety, go see Kohran *right now* and get Ms. Nikaido's memories out of your head."

"Yes, sir," she replied as she rose to leave. "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

When he was alone, Noah spoke to the empty air. "I'm not dwelling on the past, Yoriko. I still miss you, but Leda and Helen are almost enough to fill the void you left in my heart." Then he just sat there for a moment, as if expecting a reply.

Instead, the door opened. "Mr. Scott, are you all right? Safety looked upset when I passed her in the hall."

"Kelly! Come in, please. I'm fine, just surprised by something she did. What brings you away from the hotel?"

The bunnygirl who managed Hotel Stellvia sat down in one of her employer's guest chairs. "I was wondering why you wanted me to stop accepting reservations."

"Ah. Officially, it's so we have room for some refugees from the CSA."

She nodded. "And unofficially?"

"So we have room for a mage school. Assuming I can figure out how to set one up."

"I was half-afraid you were going to initiate Plan #3."

"If this just affected us, I would've declared Plan #3 when the continental shift happened, and we'd be a third of the way to Zeta Tucanae by now. But taking Wonderland with us would cause food shortages throughout the L5 cluster, and not taking Wonderland would condemn us to starvation. There's no way we can leave the Sol system right now."

Kelly smiled; it wasn't the reasoning she wanted to hear, but it would do for the time being. "All right; I'll continue refusing new reservations. Now, what else is wrong?"

Noah raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think anything else is wrong?"

"I've known you since before either of us headed Up. You've slipped into your gamemaster mode, which you only do when you're GMing or there's something on your mind that you don't want anyone else to know."

"You remember the campaign I ran on alternate Fridays before I got married?"

"The ISWAT game? I still have my techomage character sheet. Why?"

"I just found out who the Infinity Scout Service agent in our universe is."

Both of Kelly's eyebrows shot up. "Woah. Anybody I know?"

"There's the problem - should I tell anyone? It isn't as if this person's done anything wrong..."

"Aside from spying on us."

"There's no law against spying on us. Maybe there should be, but I never thought one would be necessary."

She thought for a moment. "Good point. Would it make a difference if we knew who the agent is?"

After a longer moment, Noah replied, "Maybe. She might get in trouble with the other factions if I tell them about her."

"She, huh? Well, that narrows it down..."

"Kelly!"

"You know people are going to react that way, or worse, if they find out you knew about the agent and didn't say anything."

Noah sighed and activated his PDA's phone directory. "You're right, of course. Better bite the bullet and get the worst reaction over with immediately. Where was Mal's direct number, again?"

~***~

**Temporary Convention Embassy
Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
29 November 2016, 09:25 EST**

"What? And how did you pull this off? I see. What, no, I'm not mad, do I *sound* like I'm mad? Right. No, that's just a trick of the light. Seriously. Just keep me up to date on the situation. All right, all right. Later." Mal clicked off the phone and looked out the window at Philadelphia for a minute. Then, he turned the phone back on and dialed another number.

A few rings later: "Hasegawa."

"Babe?"

"Mal? What's wrong?"

"I am going to kill your father."

Sora took this news in stride. "Well," she said philosophically, "at least I'll inherit early. Now spill;

what's wrong?"

"Oh, this one's a doozy..."

~***~

DIRECTOR'S EYES ONLY

URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT

WORLDLINE 06-2890-5849 (Codename GERNSBACK-2)

11-19-28 INCIDENT REPORT (Codename AIMLESS PLANET)

ADDENDUM 11-29-2028b

URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT URGENT

CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN scenario occurred at 08:32 Zulu, 11-29-28. After launching follow-up report (detailed in Report 11-29-2028) I was apprehended and detained by indigenous security personnel. I was then interrogated, specifically on the use of parachronic transfer gear.

Since AIMLESS PLANET, officials on GERNSBACK-2 have been more and more cautious about perceived crosstime threats, and it was this vigilance that caught me. The timing of the initial emergency calls that went out (detailed in AIMLESS PLANET Report 11-19-28) suggested that at least one GERNSBACK-2 group had access to parachronic or quasi-parachronic equipment. However, due to the scale of AIMLESS PLANET I made the assumption that local parachronics would be unable to detect the message capsule. For this, I offer my regrets and will tender my resignation as soon as can be arranged.

The incident was too public for a standard clean up mission. At least two dozen people know about the incident directly, including one major political player in the indigenous scene (see attached dossier: SCOTT, N.). Also, I was informed in my interrogation that the parachronic detectors are sufficiently spread out among other factions that any large parachronic transfer will likely be detected and intercepted. CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN is compounded by the fact that Mr. Scott obviously knew about Infinity operations in their broad strokes before the interrogation. How that happened, I don't know.

No further action has been taken by Mr. Scott or any of his allies aware of my presence in GERNSBACK-2. Mr. Scott has made an offer of free passage within GERNSBACK-2, in exchange for safe harbor for his wife and child. I told him my superiors would take it under advisement.

As of right now, CENTRUM remains uninvolved in AIMLESS PLANET to the best of my knowledge.

In summation, CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN is considered active on GERNSBACK-2, and I formally request Patrol backup along with diplomatic assistance from UNIC.

<signature>

Agent M. Tange (OF-3), Scout Service

~***~

CLASSIFIED: GRADE 6 CLEARANCE OR HIGHER REQUIRED TO ACCESS

WORLD -2/R/202X.10.07 (Codename: BLUE STARS HADES)

PARACHRONIC INCIDENT OF 2028.11.19

ADDENDUM 2028.11.30

(...) As per instructions, contact with the Secundus agent-in-place has been curtailed since the incident. Logs of my most recent contact (2028.11.25 conversation in Canberra) are appended to this record.

I must report that as of 11.29, the Secundan agent appears to be in considerable emotional distress following a meeting aboard the space station Stellvia. As I have not attempted to make contact since 11.25 I cannot report as to the nature of this distress. However, piecing together certain data points available in the public archives suggests that somebody within the Fen culture-group may have access to or knowledge of Secundan activities on this world. My superior (G5 H. Goldstein, supervisor) agrees with this preliminary assessment. Further investigation is warranted.

<signature>

CHANG, MOHAMMED (G3 Interworld Scout)

~***~

Somewhere in the foothills outside Calgary, Alberta

Worldline 05-0000-0000 (Codename: HOMELINE)

December 1, 2028

The director of the Interworld Special Weapons and Tactics division of Infinity Unlimited went over the briefing notes again. He took special care in reading the latest dispatch from the worldline of concern today. The director winced at the overly apologetic notes attached to the dispatch.

Poor woman, he thought, *nobody had any idea the indigs had parachronic sensors, she did everything by the book and yet she'll probably go down in history as The One Who Blew The Secret. Such a shame.* The director made a note; perhaps when the initial trouble had blown over, Ms. Tange would be interested in a new job.

(introducing ISWAT Sigma!)

Sigma Team was one of the ISWAT's best - and most infamous - teams. They hadn't *intended* the infamy, to be fair, but when redacted copies of Sigma Team debriefings found their way to the newly-minted Vice President of Communications (one Derek Bacon by name) infamy was thrust upon them.

Thrilling Tales of Infinite Adventure, the comic book (soon to be animated series, soon to be live-action movie) Bacon developed based off of Sigma Team's exploits was the newest and hottest-selling Infinity spin-off to hit the shelves in Homeline. The general public *loved* the idea of reading "really, really real adventures of the Infinity Patrol," giving them a glimpse of life beyond the quantum barriers. The director had tried to put a stop to the nonsense, but so long as *Thrilling Tales* sold his requests fell on deaf ears.

(marching orders!)

"So," the director said. "You've probably heard the barracks rumors about Gernsback-2. Well, whatever you've heard is most likely true."

"I don't know about that, sir," said Wildman. "I heard that the USL was invading using world-jumping tyrannosaurs as cavalry."

"In that case the rumors aren't true," the director said smoothly. "Regardless, something extraordinary has happened on Gernsback-2, and this mission comes straight from the top of the company and the Interworld Council. You're to escort a Paralabs team to the incident zone, protect them while they try and figure out what happened, then stand by for further orders."

"What if the locals find us, boss?"

The director smiled thinly. "If I've trained you properly, they won't." The group shared a dry laugh. "However, I won't discount the possibility. The indigs managed to discover the Scout who was acting as local contact, and they did it in a way that suggests they have parachronic detection gear. In the event that the indigs find you, give them name rank and serial number." The director paused. "Officially, I'm not at liberty to discuss it, nor am I even allowed to know this, so. The Council and the Board are - unofficially - engaged in discussion with one of the Gernsbackians. By the time this thing is over, they may authorize disclosure."

Darkwood let out a low whistle. "Holy shit, sir. They're really going to break the Secret?"

"The logic the Council is using is sound enough: if the Gernsbackians can track parachronic jumps, then they're not that far behind Homeline, or Centrum for that matter. Better to gain an ally than to add a rival, or worse." Sigma Team nodded en masse. They knew enough politics to know how the game was played. "Also, the Scout reports the entire IZ is geared up for a war that might flash hot at any point. If it does while you're there, well, breaking up a few fascist

military formations is good training, nein?”

The director paused again. “One last thing,” he said. “Those discussions that I am not privy to and therefore neither are you? They involve alternates of you three. These are people whom Infinity does not want antagonized.” He fixed Sigma Team with a glare. “You will *not* antagonize them.”

“Why, Chief,” Wildman looked offended. “Don’t you trust us?”

“I trust you,” the Director said, “I trust that all three of you have some demented urge to track down alternate versions of yourselves and torment them. So now I am *ordering* you not to do so. Clear?”

“Crystal.”

part the fourth: where discussions are held and agreements made

(hokay, plan for this section:

- * The prep for BURNING BRIGHT (as detailed below)
- * The last-ditch cannoning up of the US and CS
- * The first skirmishes between FIREFALL forces and the Draka (starring VF as Fox Savage)
- * The Mormon second (third?) exodus to Mars (thinking east of Helium, near the eastern mouth of Marineris) and the political fallout from that.
- * Some slower bits around the place showing how the world is coping with the new status quo.
- * Following up on the material in interlude -1, we set up a face-to-face meeting with Infinity and Centrum reps, and come to an agreement

**Spaceship “Tyger, Tyger”, Currently landed at Grunthal, Noctis Labyrinthus, Mars.
1st December 2016, 21:18 UTC**

The sun was rising over the canyons of the Noctis Labyrinth, shrowding the landed *Tyger Tyger* in a pale mist of carbon dioxide. Deep inside, Sabre put the finishing touches on the shadow fox’s interface, “There I think that should do it. First time I’ve had to install a cyberinterface.”

Sierra gave a dubious look to the cables running out of her arm This would so void the warranty
“Let’s just get this over with.”

He nodded and sent a command to boot up the shadow fox’s system. Sierra started getting system test reports through the connection.

She grimaced, screwing her eyes shut as her mind struggled to deal with the onslaught of

information. A hundred new senses clamoured for her attention at once, warnings and reports flashing up inside her mind. She opened her eyes, to see her vision filled with some strange sort of heads up display/. Blinking, she tried to clear it before realising it was supposed to be there.

Panting hard, she tried to focus on the important things, on clearing up the muddle in her mind. Sierra glanced around at the cockpit, noting instruments coming to life. Each one was reflected inside her mind.

"How does Jet do this?" she murmured, feeling the first stings of a headache coming on. She looked up at Sabre, then down at her own arm.

She closed her eyes once more, and took a deep breath. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. In the nose. Out the mouth. Finally, she opened her eyes one last time.

"Okay. I think I've got it."

Sabre's ears twitched like mad from his own connection to the zoid. A little avatar of him appeared on Sierra's hud, *"I'll tune the bootup tests to only report anything out of norm. You should be able to rearrange the hud with a few thoughts."*

Sierra just nodded. *"A voice inside my head. That's so creepy,"* A pause. She swallowed a lump, wondering if Sabre heard that. "Talk to me. Don't use the link,"

Sabre nodded, "I'll disable that so it just uses the cockpit comm instead."

"That's for the best. I'm still human y'know. I don't have the hardware Jet does,"

Sabre chuckled, "That is the point in tuning the interface, so that you don't info overload."

Another deep breath, "I think I've got it. Feels weird as all hell but I've got it."

"Well I could have setup a neural helmet, but I really don't want to mess with one of those again."

"I've got it, I've got it," Sierra assured him. She held up her hand, and the Zoid raised it's paw. She blinked, flexing her fingers and watching the claws clench and release in time. "Cool,"

Sabre shifted his weight and hooked a arm through a ladder rung. "Try thinking of slowly walking forward."

Sierra nodded, feeling a strange nervousness which reminded her of the first time her neighbour'd allowed her to drive that old GT500. In her mind, she began to picture the machine moving its legs, one paw, then the other, trying to imagine how a dog would walk.

The zoid took one hesitant step forward... then another. A thrill of fear shot through her body as she felt herself begin to move.

Speed: 10mph, her data-link announced. At least it was in proper units....

"Alright. I'm not getting any warnings here." Deep breath, "Hard part's over." She stopped the machine with a lurch before it stomped through the door.

Sabre's ears twitched "Giving Jet the comm codes by databurst. You get to name the zoid being the first official pilot."

The first thing that came to mind was Tylenol... after what she most desired. But that was silly. "Smokey, after my old dog." she said.

Sabre chuckled as he filed it away in a master list, "Fitting name."

~***~

Gruppe Leader's office, Grunthal, Noctis Labyrinthus, Mars.

2nd December 2016. 15:37 MST

"Alright," Jet relented to the voice on the other end of the phone. "They're in... but only one squad." a thought, "And make sure they've been inoculated, and have decent respirators,"

The voice on the other end of the line thanked the cyborg and hung up. Jet groaned, and damn-near collapsed into her desk with tiredness. In exchange for providing a refugee camp, the German government wanted a squad of their troops on the mission.

"Tired?" questioned Drei, an AR-series android. She looked just like Alita's first body from the Battle Angel manga. Lightweight, and cute... especially in a red t-shirt.

"Low batteries," Jet slurred sleepily. And a tired mind. "So, Where are we with this?"

Drei checked her datapad. "MASH equipment is still being installed on the *Tyger Tyger*. Cargo bay conversions are fifty percent completed. The refit of Tyger is still two days ahead of schedule. This is causing material's shortages however, our next delivery of steel is not due until tomorrow, and the shipment of F4-1L's has been delayed by engine trouble."

"Let the crews rest a bit then. They've been going hell for leather for the last week,"

Drei transmitted the order with a nod. "Expansion of crew quarters and long term accommodation has been completed. Shadow Fox *Smokey* is ready for its final test runs

tomorrow. Sabre has put in a request to the *Kammer Gruppe* for assistance with combat testing, and they've agreed."

Jet smirked, "Yoko's going to take them to school."

"Panzer Kunst against something so ungainly and slow is a bit of an uneven match," the android grinned. Her eyes gleamed as she ran through her own forms in her mind. "Too bad we can't take them with us, they'd make mincemeat of any tanks,"

"They'll be needed on the border," Jet said. "Because they make mincemeat of tanks."

"Too bad." Drei gave a gallic shrug, before getting back to business "We've received a hundred Norinco Type-56's, with another two-hundred on the way in three days time. We've also been able to scrounge up a few type 83's, with a mounting for a scope. Orlov threw in the ammunition for free, in exchange for giving away his contact details along with the rifles. It's all been listed under technical expenses."

Jet just nodded. Command wanted any surplus arms to be given to anyone on the ground willing to form a resistance...the more surplus arms they had the better. "We'll have to check them for reliability when they arrive. Make sure they shoot straight."

"Refugee camps in Bielfield and Heidelberg are thirty-five percent complete. They will be ready by the Seventh. We should receive basic bedding and clothing for the Tyger by the end of the week. The shipment of RUTF will be coming into Helium in Three hours, twenty seven minutes,"

"Grand. Can you handle that? Make sure it gets aboard *Tyger Tyger*."

"Yes. It will be loaded by tonight." The AR's inherited more than their looks from their manga counterpart. Once they said they'd do something, it was as good as done. Those eyes had a fierce determination behind them... even if it was a determination to load tonnes of Plumpy'nut onto a Whale King by the end of the day. "Taking all other things into consideration, we're a day ahead of schedule, and should be ready by December 9th."

"Great," the sleepy cyborg acknowledged, "Sooner the better,"

And Jet."

"What?"

"Get some sleep, you're still mostly human in there."

The cyborg smiled. "I will. Just when I finish this request to the Roughriders. We need those Peacemakers and Zigs. Twelve *Engels* with handcannons and elbow blades won't be enough to

hold off a concerted air attack, even from 1940's planes."

Drei left Jet in her office, alone for a few moments. Jet ran through her mental checklist, filling a few little things in. There was still at least another week's preparation ahead, at best. With a thought, she checked off the request to 36 Atalante, before moving on to the next item in her itinerary.

An operational exercise with the rest of the *Gruppe*. In six hours time. Great... time to recharge. And schedule some overhaul time for the Gruppe as well. Lord knows she felt like she needed it.

With that thought, she fell asleep on her desk... alongside a notepad, a map of the camp and an old datapad hooked by cable to her ear.

It was a peaceful, soothing sleep. All thirty-five seconds of it before her phone rang once more.

"Jet," she groaned answering it. "What is it?,"

"Jet, This is Hawkeye. There's a problem with the plumbing on the *Tyger Tyger*. The maximum flowrate's too low... We're going to need to rebuild it,"

"How long?"

"Another day, at least. We're thinking we can replace the pumps only. If not, everything's got to be ripped out."

"You'll have to talk to Sabre," Jet said, "It's his ship, he knows it better than me."

Who'd have thought organising an operation like this would be so complicated?

~***~

"That's not even considering the purely 'Dane interests.'"

The ambassador from Denmark began to open his mouth, but then closed it, having finally learned his lesson.

~~*~~

Kandor City, Luna
4 December 2016

Lime stood timidly at the entrance to Kirby Memorial Spaceport, unshed tears brimming in her blue eyes. "Why do you have to go, Daddy?"

Eljay reached tenderly under her chin and raised her face to look her in the eyes. "Lime, sweetie, sometime adults have to do difficult things, and I've made a commitment to help the folks at the Watchtower with things on earth." He moved his hand and made the motion to tousle her hair, if she weren't wearing her habitual yellow bandana. "You wouldn't want your father to break a promise, would you?"

"No..." Lime shifted suddenly and caught her father in a hug. Myomers capable of hefting a van over her head gently pressed her frame to his side. "Just..." She turned a vulnerable gaze upwards. "I don't want to lose you like we did Momma."

"Sweetie," Eljay said, swallowing a lump of emotion, "I can't promise that I won't die down there." He grunted as the hug began to tighten. "But I *can* promise that, as long as it's within my power, I'll do my best to come back to you. Now, ease up. My ribs are starting to crack."

Lime jumped back comically and blushed, causing Eljay to chuckle in fond exasperation. "Now," he continued, "I'm leaving you in charge of the shop while I'm gone, and I'm sure Aunt Jen won't mind helping out from time to time. Don't forget to put out the sign I made telling customers that commissions are closed until my tour is up. We should have enough of our stock to last a couple months for the tourist trade, and you know how to make the hardtech faction puppets."

A sepulchral chuckle interrupted the proceedings. "As heartwarming as tearful goodbyes are, we do have a schedule to keep, Captain Beergut." A twenty-something Super in a digital camouflage trenchcoat festooned with useless pouches leaned against a door frame, absently twirling a spiky knife-like object.

"Nice to see you, too, Sombre," Eljay grouched. "Stabbed any catgirls lately?"

"They started it!" Sombre bristled. He scowled, his biomod making his expression stretch into a Leifeld grimace. "Anyway, hurry it up. Huray wants us for a briefing aboard the *Charles Moulton* in ten minutes!"

"I was just finishing up, O Patient One." Eljay hugged Lime one last time and kissed her cheek. "Daddy loves you, sweetie. I'll be back before you know it."

~~*~~

((Leading up to Draka Revelation:

4 December: Gathering and preliminary briefing of Supers and Pulpers taking part in DIANA.

5 December: Transit to Toronto, secondary briefings, Team/Codename assignment
6 December: Final Briefings, culture coaching, Zone of operation assignment
7 December: (Planned) Deployment (Actual) Holy Frak! Some idiots went and made themselves DRAKA!))

[[There are two halves to hearts and minds

"Look how kind we can be"

"Look how powerful we are when we choose not to be kind,"

"We can squish your cities, punch your tanks to death and generally do icky things,"

"We can also cure diseases, solve social problems and give you guys some really cool technology... and protect you if you play ball"]]

~~*~~

Canadian Airspace

December 7

((Some prose describing the dastardly Approach of DSC *Van Schrakenberg*, a waved 10-wheel 2010 Volkswagen Constellation moving lorry. [Seriously, those things look RUGGED] Said Vessel has lurid murals on the sides of the Confederate Battle Flag with the Draka Dragon superimposed. Bumper Sticker: "We brake for Nobody"))

"Unauthorized vessels, you are infringing on Canadian airspace, please turn back now or we will be forced to engage." At the lack of response, the Canadian pilot regretfully armed his air-to-air missiles and retoggled his microphone. "Repeat, please turn back now."

A burst of static crackled across his radio. "Know yo' place, you poutine-eatin' feral Yankee serf!" With that, two of the four motorcycle-based spacecraft escorting the moving van peeled off to intercept. Sparkles trailing behind them indicated some sort of target spoofing measures were in effect.

(a few paragraphs of aerial ballet: the Canadian jet's maneuverability isn't as good as the DrakBikes, but it can go faster in atmosphere, leaving the exchanges as more like jousting than a dogfight. The Draka countermeasures prove that conventional weapons are suboptimal, but a glaring weakness from the debrief after VF's Squad is involved show Draka tactics aren't that good, they just currently have an edge in tech from "Citizen" Doctor Agatha Clay.)

The fighter pilot swivelled his head around. He'd lost track of his current target's wingman in the furball, and losing track of an opponent in a dogfight could be deadly. Just as he completed the thought, a glowing red line formed on his port wing. The smoke beginning to curl up from the edges of the line made his eyes widen. Hoping to avoid dying in the coming fireball as his fuel and munitions cooked, he reached up and pulled the ejection handles.

He felt a rush of acceleration and spinning as the rockets blew him clear of the wreckage of his plane. He recovered from his disorientation, only to catch sight of one of the bikers

bearing down on him, an energy blade of some sort held in the rider's extended right hand.

'That thing,' he thought, 'looks really sha- - -' And he knew no more.

~~*~~

((Scratch for Supers dispatch for the Draka encounter))

The assembled DIANA operatives were about to embark on their transports to the various locations chosen to receive Mystery Men: Pittsburgh, Lexington, Philadelphia, Chicago and others chosen for size and strategic importance. The operation was interrupted by a young Senshi bursting into the hangar with a message.

"Bogeys over Canada on approach vector for Richmond!" She paused to catch her breath. "Canadian Air Force is requesting our help as they've splashed the Super Hornets that were scrambled in response!"

Colonel Parker swore softly. "All right!" He turned to look over the assembled Supers. "Who's got air-to-air capability?"

Parker's adjutant looked up from her PADD. "We have three power suit operatives from the Pittsburgh, Minneapolis and Cincinnati Leagues. Everyone else either has no flight capacity or no air-to-air weaponry." She tapped the screen, bringing up the names. "Mister Bessemer, Vulpine Fury, and Red Knight of the Knight Watch."

"Right!" Parker barked. "You three heard the lady, gentlemen! I want you airborne on an intercept five minutes ago!"

~~*~~

17:50 UTC (11:50 CST), Notre Dame de Lourdes, Manitoba

Almost a thousand miles or so from Toronto, DIANA Task Force Foo Fighter made contact.

"There they are," Red Knight said. He sighted along his lance from the back of his Rocket Horse. "I figure about a thousand clicks an hour."

"How about Imperial measure for us poor, benighted, old fogey ex-Yankees?" Vulpine Fury asked wryly.

"Let's call it just less than Mach One and leave it at that." Mister Bessemer said. "Cut the chatter, we're almost on them." The boots of his jet black armor flared and brought him supersonic. "Time to fight some Foo, boys." Red Knight couched his lance and leaned forward in his saddle, while Vulpine Fury's armor lit up in a fine tracery of circuits, letting them catch up and maintain formation. As they drew nearer they were better able to make out details.

“Gee,” Vulpine Fury said dryly, noticing the lurid mural of a Confederate battle flag surmounted by some sort of dragon. “I wonder which side *they’re* on?”

“Fuck beans!” Red Knight said. “Motherfucking *Draka* Fen.”

Mister Bessemer armed his weapons. “Snakes. Why’d it hafta be *snakes*?”

The Draka by now had noticed the Foo Fighters and three had peeled from the transport, trailing glitter behind them.

“What’s the call, Skip?” Red Knight asked. “If these guys are true to their source, they’re not going to ask or give quarter.”

Mister Bessemer sighed wearily. “Just like Serenity Valley, Red.” He toggled his FTL Comm. “Foo Fighter Lead to DIANA Actual.”

“DIANA Actual here, Foo Leader.”

“Be advised, bandits identified as Draka Fen. Engaging under OpSpec Kingdom Come. Repeat: Engaging bandits under Kingdom Come.” Red Knight and Vulpine Fury grimly set their own weapons to full power. The heroic ideals they’d intended to embody in the transplanted United States had to take a back seat to the grim realities of war.

“Understood, Foo Leader. Good luck and Godspeed guys. DIANA out.”

“Thanks. Foo Leader out.” Bessemer looked back over his shoulder at his wingmen. “Remember your aerial tactics, guys.” He returned his attention to the approaching Draka and opened a hailing frequency. “*It’s clobberin’ time!*”

~~*~~

Centurion Zeldenthuis tightened his grip on the steering wheel of the transport *Van Schrackenberg*. They were finally facing *real* Yankees, not the weaksauce wannabes in Canada or the United States of Ass-end. He wanted to be out there on one of the Sliepnir battle craft proving his Draka superiority like the brave men escorting the transport in Monitor Van Rijn’s stick.

That wasn’t in the cards, however. The Archon had been quite clear. He was to either deliver the weapons to Richmond or ensure the Yankees didn’t get them. Preferably by returning to Drake’s Rock to try again, since the Archon had told him, “There ain’t many of us, and nobody likes us. Be sure to get home, son. We gotta ensure that there’s a second generation of *drakensis* somehow.” However, as a true Draka, and not just one of these Feral Rebs or the weak sister

Turnerites that had begun to swell their ranks, Zeldenthuis knew that his death might be necessary to ensure the coming of the Final Society.

Hoping that Van Rijn could handle the Yankee assault, Zeldenthuis increased the throttle from cruising speed and maintained the Great Circle course for Richmond. A glance in the starboard rear view mirror confirmed that Private Poepjes was still escorting him. It wouldn't do for the *Van Schrakenberg* to be undefended if the Yankees were to get sneaky and have another interceptor in reserve.

Monitor Van Rijn, on the other hand, was grinning in anticipation. He'd already been blooded on the F/A-18 Hornets of the Canadian Airforce; he wanted to test his superiority on more challenging Yankees than timid 'Danes. His grin took on a more malicious cast as he heard the challenge from the three approaching Yankees. 'Clobberin' time, indeed,' he thought. Just as he was about to give the order to attack, One of his wingmen revved the engine of his Sleipnir to redline and streaked towards the Yankees, calling out his own battle cry.

"Leeeee-roooy! Jennn-kins!"

"Come on, Jorgensen," Van Rijn said to his other wingman, shaking his head sadly. "Let's try to keep him from hoggin' all the fun." He armed his guns and readied his plasma saber before revving his own Sleipnir into the fray.

Van Rijn scanned the trio of Yankees, noting that Jenkins seemed to have singled out the idiot on a horse-shaped speeder. "Right. Jorgensen, yo' take the Gridiron Goofball and I'll make the Furry die in a fire."

"Yes, Suh!" Jorgensen replied.

Van Rijn was pleased to note the Red Scadian seemed to be breaking to the right to avoid direct fire from Jenkins. That was good. It was always more satisfying to shoot them down from behind. What was even better was that the Damnyankee Knight was turning into the path of the Furry, making him slow down.

Well, it was good until the Furry turned to get behind Jenkins and fired some sort of energy weapon from mounts on his shoulders. From the shudders of Jenkins' Sleipnir it looked like some sort of modified tractor beam. The beams chewed some of the fairing and the rear tire from the back of Jenkins' Sleipnir. It wasn't enough to down him, but the idiot was going to have a hell of a time landing.

Van Rijn drew a bead on the Furry, with a slight lead to allow the nine millimeter parabellum armor piercing bullets to compensate for gravity and speed. He jumped as something slammed into the armor above his fuel tank. A smoking *rivet*, of all things, sat in front of him, just beneath the Harley-Davidson logo. He turned to see if he could spot the source.

'Why the hell would someone based on a gridiron player shoot rivets?' he wondered as he began evasive maneuvers.

~~*~~

17:50 UTC (11:50 CST) Saint Vincent, Minnesota

Millie pulled her scarf tighter as she walked from the library to the Custer Cafe. The library had been bustling with the sudden demand for pulps and science fiction since the Mysterons had made diplomatic contact and she was glad for the chance to get off her feet and get something hot and filling into the aching cavern that called itself her stomach. If she had to brave the winds of a Minnesota winter, well, that was one of the prices she had to pay.

Arriving at the cafe, she pulled open the frost-rimed glass door and set the tin bell above it to ringing. The smell of roast beef and coffee reassured her that Charlie was manning the kitchen today. *Edith tries, bless her heart*, Millie thought, *but the only thing she can make is a decent apple pie*. She sat at the counter and smiled as Edith came up.

"Heya, Mills!" her old friend from high school said. "What can I getcha, hon?"

"Hello, Edith. Open-faced sandwich and a Vernor's, please."

"One drab slab and a ginger cringer comin' right up!"

Millie smiled and took in the simple flow of the conversations around her as she waited for her order.

(random note while you're thinking shit over: This fight's going to happen within sight of St. Vincent, right? **End of it will be near the border, yeah.** Then switch your POV to Millie, or some other random in St. Vincent when you get there. Instead of watching the fight entirely from the POV of the Foo Fighters or the Draka - which I also suggest doing at least once - we get to see Fen combat through the eyes of somebody in the 191 'danelaw. That is all, you may return to your regularly schedule fight in progress.)

(blah blah Featherston's a huge threat blah)

"And what do you propose to do?"

"Stop him."

"Stop him. Just like that."

"Yes, just like that."

"You'll excuse me, {foo}, but I find it hard to believe it'll be that easy."

"Oh, it won't be easy. We'll stumble, we'll fall. We're mortal, and we'll hurt and bleed and some of us will most likely die. But there's one thing we won't do: we won't *fail*. Because that's part of who we are. We're heroes. So we'll stop him, and justice will prevail though the heavens fall."

*And that's a warning to whoever's responsible for this mess, {foo} added in his head. We **will** find you, and we **will** have a reckoning. Fiat justitia ruat caelum.*

*{ "Information wants to be free" + the cellphonifiction of Africa + 191 US == ????
I don't know how or where we're going to use this, but by Xenu we're GOING TO USE THIS! }*

Nothing ever goes according to plan, so plan accordingly.

Serenity Valley, Ganymede
7 December 2016, 19:35 GST

The office was rather cramped, but that was to be expected given that the "city hall" was entirely contained inside an old cargo container. Jeph had to admit that it was *efficient*... but that was about all he'd say that was positive about it. Of the rest he'd say, only a quarter would be printable in the Danelaw.

About half of that unprintable was currently embodied by the man seated behind the antique green metal desk. Jeph would admit to his close friends that Governor Malcolm was the most annoying governor that had come to Serenity Valley, but would honestly concede that he was useful... at least for another week.

At least he wasn't beating around the bush this time. "So you're providing assistance to the efforts with the, ahem, swap issues?"

"Well, yes. We're providing logistical support to the integration efforts."

Governor Malcolm looked a bit annoyed. "Mister Antilles, you know who they're helping. They should have just let it just settle down before becoming involved and starting a fool war. And you should just leave them to it. We've got no business messing with this situation, we have enough going on up here in the Black as it is."

"Be that as it may," Jeph growled, "you do not run Jupiter Mining Corp. We have the resources needed to help with the overall situation, and that's what we're doing. More importantly," he paused for a moment, "whatever happens down there is already affecting folk here. I have missing people, whose families are looking to me, asking when their loved ones are coming

home. Economic troubles are on their way as well, far worse than you can ever anticipate. If I don't act now, things will be worse for us all. And also... they're just folk themselves. They didn't ask for their governments. They didn't ask to suddenly be yanked into a world they can barely comprehend. And they need help coming to terms with it.

"And don't worry about your precious shipments," Jeph said, intense sarcasm coloring every word. "They'll still arrive on time. But what's happening on Earth right now is just as important as anything else going on in the 'verse, maybe the most important event we have happening right now."

"What makes you think that's the case?" Malcolm looked like he was digging his heels in.

Jeph sighed, pulled out his PDA, and pulled up the first of the pictures. "I have it right here. You'd better not have eaten in the past hour."

An hour later, Jeph walked through the door of the JMC offices, closed it behind him, then leaned up against the wall beside it, sighed deeply, and seemed to deflate slightly as he released his control and his biomod kicked in, rendering him into a her.

"That bad?" Nene asked from the couch on the other side of the room. There was a small pile of pocky boxes on the couch next to her, all of them opened and emptied, which was never really a good sign.

"Well, I at least got him to back the fuck down on the idea that we just let things be until it all settles down, although I had to use the photos to do it," Jeph commented as she walked over, kicked the pile of boxes off the couch, and settled into it, curling her legs under her, laying her arms on the open arm on that side, and then dropping her head onto them. "Apparently he doesn't keep a very close eye on the newsgroups and email feeds."

"You know, you could just, well, say those six words and topple him out of the government."

Jeph raised her head up, and gave Nene a look. "You know, as tempting as that is... I'd rather get the Earth situation fixed first." She put her head back down. "Maybe I'll do it if he tries to pull that crap again. Cullen would do a much better job than he's doing anyway."

(Some stuff for Captain Garret's crew, if it ever comes needed. Maybe a bit too waffly or sentimental.... but some people are going to be hesitant, especially smaller Captains. Depends on if there's any fighting to be done.)

"I just can't stop thinking about that ambush during the war. It was my call to join Great Justice, my call to answer that distress call, my call that got my friends killed. And now I'm facing taking this ship and its crew into a potential war again.... I don't want to give that order. I don't want to

order my friends to fight and die. What right do I have to do that?

We're all a crew here, we're our own little faction on this boat, and we have to decide what we're going to do. Whether we join and fight or not we're going to do it together. So, I've thought about it... and we're going to vote. The question. Do we join this operation? The answer. Yes, or no. Write it on a piece of paper, and slide it under my cabin hatch. This is a secret ballot, so choose according to your own ideals.

It's 12:00 now. I'll announce the result at 13:00. "

After a few moment's silence... Anne spoke up. "Captain... I don't think we need to be so formal. How about the traditional All in favour, say Aye!"

"Aye!" Everyone answered.

"Opposed,"

Silence.

"The aye's have it,"

(Too mawkish or silly? Too silly, no. Too mawkish... maybe, but I have an odd tolerance for mawkish.) Well, if there's a place for it, I can sit on it There'll probably be a space for it sometime around the end of part two/beginning of part three, as the engines of war and diplomacy begin to spin up. Right, right. Either then, or any other small crew.

Training Grounds. Grunthal, Noctis Labyrinthus, Mars. December 8th 2016. 14:47 MST

Alita pursed her lips as she watched the Shadowfox struggle to keep up with the attacking *Kammer Gruppe*. Actuators whined in protest as they were pushed hard, straining to turn to machine to combat the three cyborgs who were slowly picking it apart. It was a death by a thousand simulated cuts, systems cutting out as damage was registered.

"She's working against the machine, not with it," she eventually said. "Her chi flow is all wrong, she's burning her actuators keeping up,"

Jet was sitting on a dry-ice covered rock beside her, scratching at the dirt with her heel. "Like I did when I was new,"

"How many times was it that you broke your own arm, Jet?"

"Five? I think."

Alita emitted a sharp laugh. "At least,"

"Still, Yoko's training is starting to have an effect. She hasn't destroyed her own actuators yet this time." Jet smirked,

"Yet." said Alita, flatly. "So what's your plan?"

"Was thinking a variation on the Steelyard operation back during the war....Though being erdeside screws things up. We don't have decompression on our side for one thing,"

Alita thought for a second.

"And you have to hold the ground, rather than just hit."

Jet nodded, before tracing out a map of the camp in the Martian regolith with her finger. "Hitting the camp is the easy part. These guard towers here," she pointed them out, "Machinegun positions and two anti-aircraft guns. We come in very low and close to the dirt, at supersonic speeds, we can hit them all near simultaneously. One of us to each objective, should neutralise them all within a few seconds."

The *Engel* leader crossed them out.

"If it was just taking Pinkard," she drew his house in, "That'd be enough to get him out of there. We'd be gone before ever having to worry about the hundred or so guards left alive in the barracks. But, since it'll take a couple of hours to load the *Tyger* once it's landed... we have to deal with them."

Jet sighed, leaning back, intending to say something else for a moment, before dropping it. "That's what we're using the browncoats for, with the Germans. If we can get them on the ground *quick*, landing the *Tyger* here," she drew her finger along the 'fence' which divided 'Guards' from 'Prisoners' "Then we can get the guards under control before they wake up. We hit them so hard and fast that they're heads are still spinning when they're taken prisoner. They'll be too stunned and scared to fight back. They'll have to be kept under guard... but that's better than the alternative."

Alita pursed her lips as she thought, turning it over in her mind.

"That's a good plan." she said, calmly. "A battle is easily won when the enemy doesn't know that he is fighting."

With a scream of a servo spinning uselessly, the Shadowfox crashed face-first into the red dirt, kicking up clouds of dust which were whisked away on the breeze. Sparks were spitting from is

left leg as it struggled to regain it's footing.

"Think Edo can fix that?" questioned Jet, "Sabre's getting annoyed from having to fix them all the time,"

"Edo's too busy with something *special* Drei requested, for her circuit-rider body."

"Oh?" the cyborg quirked an eyebrow "She didn't tell me about that?"

A mischievous glimmer shone inside Alita's red eyes, "She's going with you. Edo's building her a set of wings, and a pair of vectored engines,"

"Right," Jet agreed. "The more the merrier. And Len!" she clicked her fingers, annoyed at herself for not remembering sooner "She's pretty much finished her training. She should be able to get her blades at Zenith in January.... if we don't have to go before then."

"How soon could you get her ready for her *Letzte Kampf Prüfung?*" Alita enquired.

Jet took a few moments to consider, turning it over in her mind.

"She does well on the Adelaide missions. Next Monday. That'll give her time to get some practice, and prepare herself mentally."

"Monday it is." confirmed the Panzer Kunst leader.

The damaged zoid hauled itself up onto three legs and began to hobble forward, dragging its wounded leg through the dirt. The machine howled and snarled, taking as defensive a posture as it could manage.

Jet cringed, "Now this is just getting painful..."

"She doesn't give up, I'm impressed. But the *Kammers* are being deployed soon, because of the Draka." Alita sighed, "Too bad the *Engels* weren't on DIANA,"

They would've been, If they hadn't have been training for Burning Bright.

"Yeah," Jet sounded almost disappointed. " Look at how well Bessemer and Co did. They were just ordinary JLI in power armour."

"I've read the report, they'd be no contest against us." And it was hard for Alita not to sound like she was bragging. "Draka don't even understand the concept of teamwork, they just attack."

"Nope," Jet shook her head, "No contest." She gave a rueful smile, "But it's not the squishy

biomodded muppet with a laser blade that worries me. It's the poor bloody infantry with a hundred sub-machine guns and a good supply of ammunition."

~***~

Salt Lake City, Utah
15 March 2017

The Quorum had sent forth the word, and the faithful gathered. Some four hundred and fifty thousand Mormons left their homes, taking only a handful of prized possessions and the clothes on their backs, and they gathered in houses, warehouses, temples, churches, government buildings and even barns in and around the cities of Salt Lake and Provo. The handful of American soldiers still in the state watched all this activity with a nervous eye, expecting another rising.

At the heart of this activity, in the rebuilt Temple Square in Salt Lake, a dozen elders of the Latter-Day Saints stood around a large and unattractive lump of machinery placed right in the center of the square. Pipes and wires looped around the heart of the device, while metal blocks of unknown origin jutted out at odd angles. The whole thing was anchored to the ground by five clawlike appendages that grasped the earth like a raptor's talons. Several men in futuristic jumpsuits climbed around the device, tightening bolts and checking connections. Electric lights had been placed around the square, so as to provide proper illumination for the men working on the device.

Time passed, and the elders were joined by more people; first the governor and other members of the State House, then a reporter from the local newspaper, then finally a crowd of curious onlookers thronged around Temple Square. Everyone except the technicians gave the device a wide berth. Evening passed into night, and in the wee hours the technicians finally climbed down and gave the elders a satisfied nod.

"Everything's ready to go, Mr. President," said the lead tech, the gold delta badge of office glinting in the sunlight. "We can start when you're ready."

The tall, gaunt man who claimed leadership over the Mormon church gave the device a dubious eye. "And you're sure this 'spindizzy' contraption will work?" he asked.

The engineer nodded. "We tested it out in Australia a couple weeks back," he said. "It worked like a charm. What we're moving now is a bit bigger, sure, but the principle remains the same."

The president nodded, more in line with the engineer's optimism than in any understanding of what the man had said. He turned to the man standing next to him. "You're always welcome to come with us, Heber," he said.

Heber Young, the president of the Church during the underground years and current governor of Utah, gave the president a sad smile. "I can't go, Orson," he said. "I've made oaths that I shouldn't break. Besides, somebody has to stay behind, maybe show the Americans we're not all bad. I'd like to think you'll be coming home sometime before I die."

Orson gave Heber's hand a good hard shake. "Put your faith in God, my friend, and anything's possible. Good luck." Heber's smile lost some of its sadness, and he left Temple Square, the people clearing a path around him. A handful of people left with him, mostly other government men.

The president watched Young go, then turned to the Federation engineer. "Let's give him enough time to get clear, then we'll go. Before anybody else changes their mind," he half-joked.

~***~

An hour later, all over Salt Lake and Provo, wireless stations that had been broadcasting devotional music all night, switched over to a hissing sound, then through the scratchy microphone, they heard the voice of President Orson Hinckley coming into their homes and businesses.

{speech goes here}

As Hinckley finished his speech, the team of Federation engineers switched on the giant spindizzy in the center of Temple Square. In Provo, another team of engineers did the same to another spindizzy.

The people outside the city saw a tall bubble, not unlike thin glass, appear over the city. The bubble faintly reflected the early light. For a minute, the bubble held steady. Then it began to move.

With incredible slowness, Salt Lake City began to rise. The city within the bubble shook free of the ground with a tremendous roar of displaced air and floated upward at a leisurely three miles an hour. Soldiers and gentiles alike, awoken by the noise of takeoff, rushed out of their homes and watched the city fly upwards.

A few minutes later, Provo tore free and followed Salt Lake. The forcefield bubbles surrounding the two cities caught the sun's light and glowed in the early morning gloom.

Like leaves in an updraft, the Mormons rose to greet the dawn.

~***~

Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

16 March 2017, 9:45 AM (EST)

Ever since the first contact meeting in November, the Fenspace delegation had made it a point to use the Bellevue-Stratford as their designated embassy. It was close enough to the seats of power, plus it had some of the better accommodations available in the city.

Today, the embassy was occupied by General Mal Fnord and his aide-de-camp Tina Weatheral, who were enjoying a late breakfast and going over the day's briefing when Mal's phone began beeping. Curious, he pulled it out and saw a text message:

MORONI HAS WINGS - SEE YOU ON CAPRI MENSA

Mal smiled. "Well, that takes care of one problem," he said. Tina gave him a curious look, but before she could say anything, a State Department official came into the room.

"General, the President would like to speak with you," he said.

"Oh, I'll bet he does," Mal replied.

~***~

Mal entered the Presidential office in the Gray House, and was confronted by a grim-faced President Smith, and an even grimmer Army general - one of many; Mal could never remember their names. "Gentlemen," he said. "What can I do for you?"

Smith led off the discussion without preamble: "You high-handed son of a bitch."

Mal raised a Spockian eyebrow. "And a very good morning to you too, Mr. President," he said.

"Sit, General." Mal sat. "Now," Smith continued, "explain to me just what the hell your people were doing in Utah."

"Solving a problem."

"A *problem*?!" choked General what's-his-face. "Your *people* just stole millions of dollars worth of American property and kidnapped God alone knows how many American citizens, and you say you've *solved a problem*?!"

"Oh, I see how you're going to play this," Mal said. "Okay, fine. Here's how this works: When Jake Featherston finally gets antsy enough to start moving again, the Mormons would have started another revolt. Featherston already made offers of support to the church leadership; recognition in exchange for keeping your people busy. So we made them a better offer; a chance to live unmolested on their own terms. No Americans shooting at them, burning their

farms, destroying their towns, raping and pillaging their way across the desert.”

“You did this without our approval,” the general growled.

“Would you have authorized it?” Mal demanded. Smith reddened, but didn't say anything.

“Besides,” he continued relentlessly, “I wasn't aware *American citizens* required the approval of the General Staff to leave the country.”

“They're not citizens, they're Mormons!”

“*General Pierson you are dismissed.*” Smith snapped. The words hung in the air for a second, then the general stood, snapped off a stiff salute and marched out of the office. Smith waited for the door to close, then relaxed fractionally. “I'm not happy about this,” he said.

Mal shrugged. “I wasn't expecting you to be,” he replied.

“Then why?” The question was almost plaintive.

“You've read the books?” A nod. “Then you know why. The Mormons have been shat on by America for almost a century now, and left to their own devices... they're very bitter. I can't see them not revolting if they thought they had a chance, and with Featherston promising them help they'd have had a chance.”

“So that's what this is, just another way to hobble Featherston?”

“No, not entirely,” said Mal. “In war, many people die that don't necessarily deserve to. It's one of my goals to keep as many of those people alive as possible. With the Mormons away to found their New New Zion, people who would've died in an uprising won't. Simple as that.”

“I see,” Smith said slowly. “You still should have kept us appraised. I didn't need to get a panicked telegram from Colorado yelling about Mysterons stealing Salt Lake City with my breakfast.”

“Tell me the truth, would you really have agreed to this plan, had I or any of the other liaisons said anything?”

Smith considered it. “No,” he said after a moment's thought. “The idea is too insane for me to wrap my head around. Evacuating half a million Mormons into space? Absurd.”

Mal shrugged. “Just so. And we'd have done it anyway, then the diplomatic incident would've been ten times bigger.”

Smith shook his head. “You have an answer for everything, don't you?” he said, slightly

disgusted.

"I try," Mal replied easily.

"Answer me this, General. Where are the Mormons going?"

"Mars, a little plateau near the equator. The environmental engineers tell me the place should be quite nice once the terraforming's done, rather like the south of France."

~***~

(blah blah Draka make a run on the Fen delegation, Featherston finds out and is Not Happy):

Jake ground his teeth and did his best not to let his irritation show as the Drakan ambassador swanned into the room. Ragnar Danneskjold was like most of the Draka Jake had met to date: tall, blond, impossibly handsome and moving with an arrogance befitting the bluest of blue-blooded Whig aristocrats. If the man had been a Negro, he'd had been everything Jake Featherston hated rolled up into one package.

"What can I do fo' yo', Mistuh President?" Danneskjold asked.

"Sit down, Ambassador," Jake pointed at the empty seat in front of him. The Draka shrugged and dropped into the seat. "Can you explain, Mr. Ambassador," Jake said, "just *why* the damnyankee wireless is screaming about Southern treachery and an assassination attempt on the Mysteron delegation? More to the point, can you explain why this is the first time I've heard about it?"

Danneskjold shrugged. "We were attemptin' to do right by our allies an' fix a potential problem," he said. "Nothin' to get excited about."

(...)

"You can't do this, you damned ignorant bushman! You *need* us!"

"Well, now," Jake said. "I do need your people's understanding of Mysteron gear, and I need your Archon's support. That's true enough." He smiled savagely. "On the other hand, the books your Archon so graciously provided tell me enough about the Draka to know that *you* are expendable."

Danneskjold blinked in surprise, then with a roar lunged forward, trying to get across the desk. The .45 in Jake's hand barked once, and Danneskjold bounced off the desk and rolled to the side, his shirt covered in a spreading bloodstain. Jake gave the ambassador's corpse a brief glance, then picked up the phone. "Lulu," he said, "have some of the boys come up, there's a

mess needs cleaning up in here. And call around to Army HQ, I want Colonel Potter up here as soon as he can get here.”

The Gray House, Richmond, Virginia
{date} 2017, 4:50 PM EST

Lulu made most of his telephone calls. He made this one himself, on a special line that didn’t pass through her desk. Men checked the line twice a day to make sure the damnyankees didn’t tap it. It rang only once before the Chief of the General Staff picked it up. *“Forrest speaking.”*

“Featherston,” Jake said, then, “Blackbeard.” He hung up.

There. It was done. Whatever was going to happen would happen. The die was cast.

Jake worked through the rest of the day. He ate supper, then went on working. Lulu brought him cup after cup of coffee. At ten o’clock, she walked back into Jake’s office with the most peculiar look on her face. “The Fenspace envoy is on the phone,” she said. Jake grunted an acknowledgement and waved her back to her desk.

He picked up the phone. “Featherston.”

“Last chance, Mr. President,” the envoy said. *“We don’t have to go into the abyss together.”*

“I don’t know what you mean,” Jake said, the picture of perfect sincerity.

“No,” the envoy said, sounding disappointed. *“No, I suppose you wouldn’t. Very well, Mr. Featherston, on your head be it.”*

“Is that a threat?” Jake asked, his voice now low and angry.

“No,” replied the envoy. *“That’s a promise. Goodbye, Mr. President, we won’t speak again.”* The envoy hung up. Jake shrugged and put the phone away. If the Mysterons wanted to tussle with him, then he’d happily take them all on, magic or no magic. And speaking of magic...

Jake opened a drawer in his desk, one that was kept under tight lock and key. Inside was yet another telephone, this one a scorched copy of a Mysteron phone. He opened the handset and pushed the shiny green button. Unlike the phone to the General Staff, this one rang four times before someone picked up. *“Ingolfsson.”*

“We’re starting,” Jake said.

“Well, it’s about damn time you did,” Ingolfsson said. Jake bridled at the indignant condescension in the man’s voice. Very few people in Jake Featherston’s life had ever used that

tone with him, and only one of them still counted among the living. But Jake hadn't gotten to the top by exploding every time someone was snotty to him, so he dampened the explosion as Ingolfsson went on. *"Our people are ready, and we'll make our countermoves as soon as the Fen make theirs."*

"Good," said Jake, and hung up. He'd gotten what he wanted from the man, there was no need to listen to him go on about the Final Society or whatever. The Draka made for infuriating allies, but they were useful, and for Jake that was all that mattered.

~***~

Several hundred miles north, the Supreme Commander of Operation FIREFALL hung up his phone. The miracle of distributed communications allowed the ad-hoc headquarters group to operate as a unit despite millions of miles of separation. Spy satellites picked up the heat coming from Confederate engines, the information fed through to analysts in orbit, on the Moon and on Mars. The data would then be packaged and transmitted to the Supreme Commander in Philadelphia, and from there orders would be sent out.

"So," Mal Fnord said. "This is it."

"Yes sir," said the on-duty analyst at Greenwood. *"We're picking up bloom all up and down the line. We expect they'll start moving in the next three hours."*

Mal looked up at the stars. In his mind's eye, he could see the lines connecting everything starting to converge. "Inform our liaisons on the line and with the *Queen Elizabeth* strike force. Put BURNING BRIGHT on hot standby; they're to drop as soon as things start moving." He paused, and took a deep breath. "And put me on the on-call," he added.

"Yes sir," said the duty officer. All over the Solar System, people stopped at the sound of the announcement chime. For a moment, it seemed as if the entire species held its breath.

"Comrades: What we've expected and feared these last few months has come to pass," Mal said. "The Convention expects that each of you do your duty, to your comrades, to your nations, and to your homeworld. That is all, prepare for action."

~***~

Jake Featherston worked on through the night, Lulu eventually going home to bed. He kept on, {date} turning into {date}, working behind blackout curtains that kept light from leaking out of the Gray House.

Mal Fnord followed suit, his holographic control panels glowing in the dimmed Philadelphia night as he finished putting his last pieces into play.

At a quarter past three, both men stopped to hear the sound of airplane engines and the distant roar of artillery. Jake whooped with glee as his long-awaited revenge began. Mal sighed mournfully and abandoned his rooftop perch for a safer venue.

The lines of destiny converged to a point, and the race was on.

part the fifth: where the shift hits the fan.

(and this is it! We start with Featherston ordering Blackbeard, not quite when it's ready but before the US is close to ready, and the Fen make their moves. What happens next we'll have to hack out as a group, but here's where the war begins.)

~***~

**Forward Cargo bay. Whale King transport *Tyger Tyger*. Earth orbit.
{date} 05:45 GMT. D -15 minutes**

Jet Jaguar, and eleven other Kunstlers of the Panzer Kunst Gruppe stood on the launch ramp of the *Tyger Tyger*. Drei, with her motorball body and a pair of wings stood with them, grinning in anticipation. It was her first mission.

The two zoids loomed over the assembled crowd... Ford Sierra running final checks in the Shadow Fox's cockpit. Sabre himself was standing beside her, with his telepresence body up on the Tyger's bridge.

Ten soldiers of the Deutsche Bundeswehr stood at attention... incongruous among the Browncoat's and Sammies of Fenspace. The Blue Blazers of the MASH unit hurried to complete last minute preparations.

This was *it*.

And it started in a bar last November.

Jet took a deep breath, her mouth going dry. A speech had been written for her... she'd tried herself, but it hadn't exactly been up to scratch. She called it up into her field of vision the text of the speech, and checked the time.

"I can't believe I'm leading something like this," she mumbled to herself.

Deep breath. Speak loud and confident.

“Ladies and gentlemen of Operation BURNING BRIGHT:”

Silence. Everyone turned to look at her. The entire deck hanging on her next words.

“Six decades ago, the world made a promise. Never again. And here we are, keeping it.” She let that hang for a second, before switching to the prepared portion. “In the next hour, you will partake in what will be the first salvo in a war. Unlike some, who fight for glory, or for wealth, or for power, you will be fighting for the most noble cause possible: freedom. You will be fighting for the freedom of over ten thousand people trapped in the prison camp below us. And you will be fighting for the freedom of the families of those ten thousand, and for millions more trapped under the brutal thumb of a tyrant and the system that created him.”

Jet was shaking, trying to speak as confidently as the speech demanded.

“Furthermore, you will be sending a message, to the Confederate leadership and to the world at large. You will tell them that we will not stand idly by while murder and mayhem are perpetrated against the powerless. You will tell them that their weapons, while terrible and brutal, cannot stand against our ingenuity. And you will tell them that a free society will always triumph against the slave society.”

A strange murmur ran through the crowd.

“This will not be an easy task. Your enemies are not foolish, and they will retaliate. But I have every confidence in your courage and devotion to duty and your skill in battle. We will accept nothing else than full victory!”

They cheered... they all cheered and clapped, drowning Jet out for a moment. Applause rang off the white painted steel. Jet held up her hands, trying to get them to quieten down. It took a few seconds, loud shushes running through the crowd, damping down the enthusiasm to a soft mumble. Jet swallowed, staring straight ahead.

“Good luck. Those of you who follow a God, ask their blessings for the beginning of this great and noble undertaking.

“All hands, brace for turbulence.”

They cheered again, and Jet’s heart raced, adrenaline surging through her body. It was certainly an addictive rush to be at the head of a crowd like that. She stood, watching them run off to their stations. Both Zoids crouched down onto their bellies as the Bundeswehr started to secure their gear.

Everyone could feel the *Tyger*’s engines ramp up, the deckplates shuddering beneath their feet.

“Atmosphere in thirty seconds,” the tannoy announced in a woman’s voice.

There was a feeling of being part of something awesome, of something worthwhile and epic and historical... of something truly ‘right’ and ‘good’. The air was electric with pride.

Jet was terrified. They were all looking to her. She looked down at her own reflection in the patterned steel of her right elbow-blade.

“I just hope I don’t fuck this up,” she said quietly.

“Hard part’s over,” Gant reassured her. The blue armoured Kunstler wore a strangely goofy grin as he adjusted the thrusters in his palms. “Eisenhower would be proud,”

Jet nodded lightly, closing her eyes, focusing on her body’s sense. She could smell the oil and sweat and steel of the *Tyger*, hear the engines roaring and whining amidst the hubbub of the crowds and feel the vibrations resonating through her body’s structure. Red-tinted eye-black tickled on her cheeks. The Zoids flashed bright on her radar, while radio transmissions from the bridge out to Headquarters filtered through her mind

Calmness and oneness with the senses.

She took one breath, focusing her awareness for an instant on the world in front of her, on a Sammie chattering about her Hello Kalashnikov. Exhaling slowly through her lips, she swept that point around her, expending it to fill the entire deck and the world around her and inside her body.

When she opened her eyes again, Jet was calm as a millpond inside. Her training was taking over, her mind switching into hunter-warrior mode. She watched all the others do the same thing.

“Good luck, everyone,” she said once more.

The *Tyger* shook and juddered as it slammed into the upper atmosphere, somewhere over California.

~***~

Sabre avatar’s gaze was fixed on the crystal windows that made up the forward and side walls of the *Tyger*’s bridge. The crew was a mix of Trekkies and Warsies with a pair of Browncoats on weapon stations. He felt the *Tyger* start to shake on reentry and nodded as he started to recite a poem.

“Tyger Tyger, Burning Bright.”

A few of the bridge crew glanced his way.”

“In the forests of the night.”

They traded looks with each other. Then went back to what they were doing. Sabre was a odd one even for Fen and if some of the rumors were true probably explained why.

“What immortal **hand** or **eye**.”

One of the trekkies looked up, “Ground radar detected, activating the jammers.”

“Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

Sabre nodded to him and smirked.

“In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?”

A quiet computer command started the confed radio jamming. Across the target area all known confed radio channels were smothered with silence. No static, no music, just the deepest silence possible.

~***~

Y-Ranging Outpost, near Lubbock, Texas, Confederate States of America
{date} 11:55 local time, D-5 minutes

The Y-ranging set operator looked at his scope, watching at least 12 discrete targets race across his field of view at a speed he estimated to be well north of a thousand miles an hour, coming in from the west. Too high fast to be anything Yankee.

Remembering the last time he saw a track like that, he drew the natural conclusion.

“Hey Joe!” he hollered, “I think we got some Mysterons!”

“You sure? I don’t wanna run on down to that gas station at this time of night,”

.

“I’m sure.” he confirmed, feeling rather proud of himself. “Too big and constant to be a glitch.” a pause. “Gotta phone it in at least, those are our orders,”

“Well at least wait until you see where they stop,” Joe snapped back, “I’m not running five miles there unless we’ve got something worth telling them,”

The targets vanished, leaving only fading ghosts on the cathode ray display.

“Hold off!!” the operator called. “They just... disappeared.”

“Do we still report this?”

“Are you kidding...”

~***~

**Camp Dependable, Just outside Alexandria, Louisiana. Confederate States of America.
{date} 11:57pm local time. D-3 minutes**

Assistant Troop Leader Peter Wells fought against the breeze with his lighter, desperate to light the cigarette squeezed between his lips. It might’ve been late April, edging into summer, but it was still damned cold at night.

The wind whipped through his guard tower, mumbling and whispering through the barbed-wire below. The wooden structure creaked, reminding of a cheap horror flick.

At least it was blowing from the countryside, and not the camp behind him... thank the Lord for small miracles. The lighter sparked and flared brightly, gasoline flame fluttering in the wind. He held the flame against the tip of cigarette, and was rewarded by the flavour of cheap tobacco smoke after a few moments.

Drawing deep, he snapped the lighter shut before hiding it away in his pocket. He blew the smoke out through his mouth, making a small cloud in the night. At least the smokes kept him warm.

There ain’t nothin’ like a good warming smoke on a cold April night. Knowing his luck it’d probably rain later. It was already starting to cloud over.

He threw a glance down at the wire, then out over the camp behind him. All was quiet... as quiet as the camp got. Smoke rose from the guards barracks, and the commandant’s residence. With lip-service paid to his duty, he got back to back to standing around freezing... and looking forward to a time when he could finally get inside and get properly warm.

There was a roar of laughter from the main gate, breaking across the camp.

Goddammit.

Bunch of crazies actually came back laughing. He finished his smoke, grinding it out beneath

his boot-heel. A few glowing embers were caught by the wind, blowing up like burning orange fireflies.

One caught his gaze, burning steadily in the sky to the east.

Now what in the hell is that?

~***~

**Forward Cargo bay. Whale King transport *Tyger Tyger*. Skies over Louisiana
{date} 05:59:00 GMT. D -60 seconds**

The partition doors closed behind the *Kunstlers* leaving the thirteen armoured figures alone in the launchbay.

Jet looked at them, mindful of what had happened the last time the *Engels* had gone into battle as a *Gruppe*. Three of them had been killed, including *Krieger* Armblest. Jet had taken his place, after the Kentucky Tiger incident. The Kentucky Tiger was in command of the Whale King...

There was something appropriately cyclical about that.

"*Gruppe* Helmets on!" she ordered. "Visors down. Switch to vox. Systems check,"

Twelve voices answered in turn. Nobody'd broken down. Jet offered silent thanks to whatever God was currently paying attention.

"Jet, Acknowledged." she finished with herself. "Hart kämpfen,"

"Echten kämpfen!" the twelve others responded.

"Hart kämpfen!" Jet bellowed once more, almost interrogating them.

"Echten kämpfen!" the twelve confirmed.

Jet felt her heart race, her blood firing him. One last time.

"Hart kämpfen!" as if she didn't believe them

"Echten kämpfen!" they roared, voices resonating inside her mind and off the walls of the bay.

With a thought, Jet transmitted the command to open the launch-bay doors. An instant later, a shudder ran through the deck as the hydraulics spun into life. With a whine and a squeal of stiff

gears, the mouth of the Whale King began to open.

A cold Louisiana night roared in at over five hundred miles per hour, washing over the *Kunstlers*. It pulled at Jet's body, chilling her frame. Through the clouds, she could see the lights of a few villages and towns rolling past.

She checked the time on her onboard clock and stepped forward onto the ramp... determined to lead from the front. Drei stepped up beside her, adjusting her brand new wings. Jet sprung her own into place, taking one last step up towards the lip of the ramp.

She checked her blades one last time, checked the others. She fixed Camp Dependable into her onboard navigation system, the camp highlighted with a simple green dot.

"Commence Operation BURNING BRIGHT," she broadcast. "*Gruppe! Angreifen!*" The cyborg roared, firing her engines.

The other's followed, blazing through the night sky, acceleration fast ahead of the decelerating Whale King.

Simultaneously, F-EZigs dropped from launch bays inside the two Peacemakers accompanying the *Tyger*. They swarmed around the transport, pilots keeping a sharp eye out. Freed of their encumbrance, the Peacemakers accelerated up to a patrolling altitude, *Aluminum Overcast* and *Six Blade Shadow* droning and trailing thick white contrails behind them. The *Shadow's* running lights were flickering crazily... having apparently malfunctioned.

The *Tyger Tyger* lowered itself into the clouds like a diving whale. Both Zoids prepared themselves for launch.. Deep in the belly of the transport Doctor Tenma prepared stocks of food and water for immediate use, along with sterile bandages, disinfectant and... for the absolute worst case, a dose of green handwavium.

Sub-Lieutenant Heinz made sure his troops were ready, checking their weapons and equipment. Nothing was going to fall off. After the *Kunstlers*the cyborg's butchering of his language still made him wince... they would be the first on the ground by fast-rope, before the *Tyger* landed. They would followed by the sailor girls in gasmasks, and the trenchcoat equipped Browncoats who reminded him of old World War Soviet troops. All were armed with Chinese copy Kalashnikovs.

Heinz missed his G36.

~***~

**Camp Dependable, Just outside Alexandria, Louisiana. Confederate States of America.
April 22 12:01pm local time. D+1 minutes**

Pete watched the clouds, looking at the point where he'd see than 'flare' disappear. He could hear a strange rolling thunder, mixed with the distant drones of aircraft engines. His body bristled with an electric apprehension.

Something was badly wrong in that sky. His first thought was to reach for the machine gun... but that pointed inwards into the camp, not out. He clicked the safety off on his rifle, just to be sure.

He saw what looked like fireflies fall from the clouds... about a dozen of them, each burning a shade of blue, yellow or orange... drop far faster than anything ever had a right to fall. The fireflies spread out, apparently flying in formation.

It was a dreadful realization.... *bugs don't fly in formation.*

Feeling a flash of panic, he raised is rifle, thinking first to aim at one of them and try shoot it down. No good... they were moving way too fast.

"Hey Andy, we're under attack!" he hollered down to the gatepost. "A buncha... somethings coming in from the east,"

"You full of shit Pete," the answer came back, "You really want to wake Pinkard at this hour of the night with a false alarm?"

"You blind ass, I swear I could see them, Low, over the treeline."

He was pointing right at the one in the centre of the group.

"They're just fireflies, dumbass,"

Pete grimaced.

"They're flying straight and level and in a formation you stupid sonofabitch! I know, my dad was a pilot in the last war."

Pete watched one of them accelerating ahead of the group, tracking it with the sights on his rifle, trying to line it up. In three seconds, it went from being a point of light, to *something* distinct... It banked right, still seeming far away but moving silently at a fantastic speed. He could see blue jets flaring.. four of them, glinting off of what might've been armour.

It shot past, a hundred yards beyond the perimeter, chased by a whip-crack that beat against his chest and a whoosh that reminded of those sci-fi rocket serials.

His heart hammered.

How fast was that?

Two more bulleted by, sounding like gunshots chased by a strange whistling roar.

“Hey!” the guardsman cried out, “I see ‘em. Those ain’t no planes neither!”

The man below had started to panic, Pete could hear it in his voice, he could hear him struggling with his machine gun, trying to load it. He snapped back around, searching for one of them fireflies. He saw it, ten yards out. He saw a vaguely human body, covered in armour. He saw where the face should’ve been, only a grim satin visor. He saw a pair of thrusters on its back glowing a bright yellow as it braked rapidly, a sudden rush of sound overcoming him. He saw the wings of this purple-tinted angel of death as it slowed down in front of him. The number ‘03’ printed in gold letters on one wing and the glinting blades on her forearm.

He saw it all through the sights of his rifle.

Pete’s finger tensed on instinct. He didn’t even hear the shot, more felt it... exulting for an instant as his target disappeared in a flare of light, rising up. There ain’t nobody that’s a faster shot than Peter We...

That triumphant thought was interrupted by the feeling of heat rush overhead, like sticking his head under a bathroom dryer, followed by a sensation of two *somethings* sliding into his body. Hot, but not painful.

The last thing he saw were the shining tips of two metal blades sticking out through his coat, tinted red.

‘Oh da...’

The thought was cut off. Assistant Troop Leader Peter Wells had the dubious honour of being the first casualty in the war between the **Mysterons** and the Confederacy

~***~

**Camp Dependable, Just outside Alexandria, Louisiana. Confederate States of America.
April 22 12:02pm local time. D+2 minutes**

“Tower Gamma neutralised,” Drei transmitted, landing in the camp grounds. The wheels on her feet spun up, kicking up stones as she raced to her next objective. Excitement sparked throughout her body, a strange static charge that thrilled the android to the core. Her blades shone in the moonlight, little rivulets of red running back towards the tip.

Too bad he’d gotten a shot off. Drei was forced to give him some credit, whomever he had been,

he had impressive reactions for a human.

Another rifle crack echoed in the night, reassuring her that she wasn't the only one who was a little slow.

"AkAk Alpha neutralised," Gant's voice announced over the comm's.

The last of their first objectives.

"Good work," Jet transmitted, "Proceed to second objectives." a beat, "*Engel One to Tyger Actual*. Shield's down."

The guards on the ground were neutralised. Anti-aircraft had been disabled. It was safe for the *Tyger* to land. Now, for the armoury, the main administrative block, and the Commandant's residence.

The *Kunstlers* split off to their pre-assigned targets, converging on the buildings from multiple directions. Drei marked her target on her field of vision and raced towards it.

~***~

Commandant's Residence, Camp Dependable
{date} 12:02pm local time. D+2 minutes

Pinkard was awake with the first shot, bolting upright in his bed. He listened, feeling a sharp pang of fear as the second shot cracked the air. It was followed by a long rumble of leaden thunder, which seemed to outweigh the whole sky above him.

Just some dumb prisoner making a break for the wire, he figured.

He heard an odd sound... like a barrel being dropped on the ground, followed by another a few seconds later. He started to wonder... what were those jackasses at the gate doing now?

Groggily, he got himself out of his bed and started to get dressed. He'd have to check this out.

~***~

The *Tyger* swept in from the west, dumping speed and sending up a rolling cloud of dust across the guard barracks. As the ship came to a hover over the center of the parade grounds. The belly doors swung open, allowing the roar of the engines to enter the compartment.

Tyger hung in the air, directly above the fence that divided the prison from the barracks, massive jet's whipping up a tornado of dust and grit. Lights were turning on in the barracks, guards

hurrying to drag their asses out of bed. A two hundred meter long transport... was difficult to hide.

Lieutenant Heinz adjusted his gasmask, and stepped up to the edge of the doorway. He looked to his squad, checking their gear. They were almost as disgusted with the Kalashnikov knockoffs as he was.

He'd still rather have his 36... if only because he was more familiar with the thing. Black ropes dropped from the landing ramp, free ends whipping in the jet-engine breeze.

"Squad!" he barked in his native tongue, "Let's go!"

The first ones were already on the rope as he gave the order. They hit the ground after a few seconds, fanning out into the dustcloud. He gripped the rope in his hands, offered a quiet prayer to God and dropped himself in the swirling cloud. He felt himself spin dizzily as he was caught by a hot gust spilling from the *Tyger's* engines.

Hitting the ground in a daze, he stumbled before plunging into the cloud in the direction he though was the right one. Stones and grit bit at the plastic in his goggles. Sweat prickled and tickled on his face, his breath hot and moist.

He emerged from the cloud into the camp lights, catching up with his squad. Heinz was the last one off the deck for a good reason. He could see his squad in front of him... all of them.

"*Tyger* actual, Blitz One. On the ground and clear," he radioed. He took a deep breath, looked back up at the monstrosity looming over him taking half a heartbeat to marvel at the...unbelievability of it all, before he saw the grey, fox-shaped machine step out onto the ramp.

"Go!, Go!" he signaled to his squad. They were clear, but he still wanted them to be as far as possible away from that thing when it landed.

They didn't need the encouragement.

In full body armour, loaded with ammunition, they ran like hell, already near drowning in sweat. A few figures were already darting out from the barracks doors. Some were carrying old bolt-action rifles.

"Drop them!"

He raised his rifle, his heart raced, and he squeezed the trigger.

~***~

Automatic rifle fire echoed over the camp, sounding like a sewing machine of death... a distinctive, mechanical staccato bark. A few single snaps answered back, flashes of fire strobing from the direction of the barracks.

“Oh crap,” Sierra mumbled to herself, gently urging *Smokey* out to the edge of the ramp. Her hands shook on the throttles. Inside an armoured cockpit, it was still hard not to be nervous.

Sierra pushed the machine forwards, dropping rather than jumping. Just shy of seventy tons of Zoid crunched the barbed-wire fence into the dirt. A few cables snapped and lashed back. A quick glance down at the ground to check for any friendlies on the ground and Sierra turned the machine towards, the front gate.

‘Run’

The zoid shot forward, leaping the gate of its own accord before Sierra’s mind had caught up. She pulled the mech right, into the marshy lands surrounding the camp. Sabre landed a few seconds later, calmly strolling up to the main gate, taking up station, daring anything coming down the road to attack.

~***~

**Barracks Six, Camp Dependable,
{date} 12:03pm local time. D+3 minutes**

They had all crowded around the barred windows, trying to figure out what the commotion outside was about. It sounded like God’s own riot... the horribly familiar crackle and snap of gunfire, overlaid by a sound like a freight train was going to just drop on in and on top of them. Flashes of light strobed up from the guards’ barracks.

Someone was fighting them.

“What, do you see, what do you see?” those inside in the foetid darkness pleaded, “What’s goin’ on out there?”

“A firefight,” Willy Knight answered. He clutched at the window bars until his fingers bled, pulling himself tight against them to get as much of a view outside as possible. “Looks like somebody’s kicked something off in the guards’ barracks,”

“I thought I saw...” a voice came from the other window “....I thought I saw a giant cat,”

“Must’ve been a damn truck or something,” another reassured him.

Willy’s mouth was dry, his whole body shaking. He could see *somebody* fighting the guards,

somebody professional enough not to panic fire on full-auto with what was obviously an automatic weapon.

Should they hope, or should they fear?

The freight train rumbled morphed into a banshee's scream, sounding like it was about to drop right down on top of them. Men cowered and prayed for salvation... Willy ducked down as low as he dared as a gale began to rush past outside, flooding the prison block with an acrid heat.

Willy Knight watched agape as the two-hundred meter long *Tyger Tyger* bisected the camp along the dividing fence. "Lord have mercy..." he mumbled.

(TBH, I'd prefer if somebody else handles the camp's population.)

~***~

Lieutenant Heinz winced, ducking behind the sandbags which protected the machine-gun emplacement. Bullets thudded against them, chased by the rattle of a sub-machine gun.

The comm-bead tickled in his ear. "Blitz one, blitz two. "Man down! Man down!"

"Shit," Heinz swore under his breath. He could see them pinned behind a concrete barricade on the other side of the building. Whoever these people were in the barracks, they weren't stupid. Twenty of them were still able to keep a team of five down through judicious application of ammunition. How much did they have in those buildings? He was already down to his last magazine.

If this kept up, they'd be fighting the whole garrison within a few minutes. Some were already making a break for the armoury, covered by the gunfire keeping Heinz down. A round clattered off the machine-gun above his head. Its gunner had just about managed to get it loaded with a full belt, before he'd been killed by the *Engels*.

Inspiration struck.

It might've been pointing the wrong way, but that could be rectified.

"Henk!" he turned to the private beside him, "Get that machine gun working! Everyone else, Cover him!"

A firestorm erupted across the side of the hut, wood splinters spalling off. The gunfire from

inside stopped as the defenders ducked down, hiding behind something more substantial than paneled wood.

Stay down... stay down.

He ran out of ammunition. He took Henk's rifle and started firing again.

"I'm out!" someone yelled.

Henk dropped down beside him, resting the machine-gun on top of the sandbags. He didn't need to be ordered to shoot.

It ripped the air apart. Someone in the barracks peered out a window for a second, just long enough to catch a bullet. The rip-saw machine-gun tore through the side of the building, cutting straight through the wood, filling the building with a hail of lead and flying splinters of wood.

He didn't want to think about what that was doing to the men inside.

Moments later, a second machine-gun opened up on the barracks. He scanned across at the other emplacement... it had been taken by a team of Browncoats.

A few short bursts of gunfire crackled from within the barracks, and from around the armoury, and the admin' building. And then nothing.

"All Units, blitz one. Hold fire."

The gunfire took a few seconds to die down, the two machine guns going quiet first, followed by the last few shots from Browncoats who hadn't quite caught up yet. Henk was grinning like a loon while the barrel of his liberated gun smoked. He reloaded with a fresh belt, just in case.

Moments later, a white t-shirt was hung out a window, tied to the end of dented steel pole.

"It looks like they're surrendering," Henk said.

Heinz nodded, sucking on his lips. The front door cracked open.

A single figure stepped out, still in sleeping shorts and a t-shirt. His hands were raised weakly above his head.

"Don't shoot!" he pleaded.

"All Units, Blitz One. Move in and secure the barracks and prisoners. Evacuated the wounded to the *Tyger*."

Heinz was shivering. That had been... harder than expected.

~***~

Commandant's Residence, Camp Dependable
{date} 12:05am local time. D+5 minutes

Jet had heard the machine guns open up for a few seconds... before going quiet. She heard the transmission from Heinz moments later, exhaling a sigh of relief as she landed outside Pinkard's door.

She kicked it down, and went looking for trouble.

Inside, the first guard had just enough time to notice her, before his chest was smashed in by a an open-handed strike that rung his skull like a bell. Jet finished the man with a slash from one of her blades, before knocking him out of her way.

The second guard barked a warning to Pinkard, raising his submachine gun. Jet's body was running on auto-pilot. She spun herself out of the line of fire, angling her blades for a decapitation strike.

Before the thought even entered the guard's head to fire, his head had hit the floor. His body dropped on top of him a moment later.

"*Engel One, Engel Four.* Armoury is under control," Tiegel's voice entered her mind, accented in German. "No losses,"

A moment later.

"*Engel One, Engel Twelve.* We've taken the administration building." Len chirped, giddy on an adrenaline high, "No losses,"

~***~

Pinkard heard the gunfire outside die down. He heard the door to his home break open, sounding for a moment like a bomb had gone off in the hallways. He'd heard the warning from his guard. He'd heard the men outside die.

Half panicking, half dressed, he stumbled out into the hallway and saw *it* for the first time. Tall... at least six foot with overlong legs ending in a high-heeled solid foot. Vaguely feminine, but armoured like a walking barrel. Her face was hidden by a blue visor, standing out from the pearlescent white armour.

“Commandant Pinkard?” it questioned, sounding as if it already knew the answer.

“Who the devil are you?” he snarled, trying to hide his fear beneath a wall of anger. His eyes fell on the two patterned blades mounted to her forearms, stained red. Pattern welded steel, his old profession assured him. Terribly sharp. Clearly used. And obviously effective.

His eyes fell on the bloody mess on the floor.

“You one of *them*!” he cried, “A Yankee-loving Mysteron *butcher*,”

Terror flared in his veins. The Mysteron reached out, grabbing him by the shoulder in a vice like grip.

“I’m not American,” it said in an accent Pinkard just couldn’t place, actually sounding a little wounded by the suggestion. The figure spun him around with an unnatural strength and ease. His head swam. He expected the final blow to come to the back of the skull. Instead, his arms were painfully wrenched behind his back, pulling on the tendons in his shoulders. Something popped.

“You’re hurting me!” he yelled.

The pressure actually eased a little, to his surprise. His captor hadn’t intended to harm him. Instead, his wrists were bound in something sharp and solid, yet strangely flexible, a type of bakelite maybe.

Part of him wanted to struggle. A rush of adrenaline demanded he fight back as the Mysteron pushed him down the hall. But, he wasn’t a moron... he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that if he fought back now, this figure half manhandling him out of his own home could rip his arms off without even breaking a sweat. After all... they’d damn nearly done it without even realising they were about to. A throbbing pain in his shoulder remind him of that with each nudge.

“You’re under arrest,” the Mysteron said solemnly. “For crimes against humanity,”

“*Engel* One to all units,” Pinkard heard her say, “Primary target is in custody. Nice job everyone.”

And Oh Lord didn’t she sound glad of that.

~***~

Camp Dependable Just outside Alexandria, Louisiana. Confederate States of America.
{date} 12:10am local time. D+10 minutes

Jet watched two of the Germans being taken away on stretchers. A few of the camp garrison followed them. If the universe had as fine a sense of irony as Jet suspected, some of them might well end up 'modded with dark skin.

The others were being rounded up into their squads by Browncoats... who weren't too shy about cracking skulls with the butt of a rifle at any 'damnyankee' cracks. They stood in formation in the cold night air, shivering. It was alright, they could take it for a bit, they were still healthy. They wouldn't freeze.

Pinkard himself just sat in the dirt, too stunned and sick to even stand. Of all the things that were going to happen to him, what terrified him most was what Jake Featherston would do to him when he found out about this.

The Sammies were filtering out into the main camp, cracking open barracks doors, getting prisoners out. Jet didn't envy their job in the least. She heard the shocked remarks over the radio. Blue Blazers followed them into the barracks.

A few of the other Browncoats were busy securing the camp's buildings, or manning the machineguns in the guard towers. It was only a matter of time before the Confederate army responded, and they had to be ready to fight them off.

Overhead, the Zig's circled close by maintaining a patrol, while the two Peacemakers waited high above acting as airborne warning with their sensors. The first to arrive would be the air force. It would take hours for any infantry to appear in numbers.

The final act was to lower the Stars and Bars from the base flagpole, and raise the Spaceship and Sun.

Seeing this was done, and the camp was safe and under control for the time being, she activated her radio.

"*Tyger* Actual, *Engel* One. Signal to FIREFALL Command: Deliverance Base here, the Tiger has taken the lair."

She had genuinely meant to say 'Dependable'.

Taking the base was the easy part. Now it was a case of holding it for however long it took to get the camp's population aboard the *Tyger*.

~***~

**Confederate Razorback *Strange Lovin'* , {{Somewhere in the Eastern US}}
{date} {time} local time.**

Major Lindley checked his instruments and saw that all was well with his bomber. The engines thrummed musically, powering the bomber through the night sky over the United States. He pushed his mic against his throat.

“Well this is it fellas, aerial combat toe-to-toe with the Yankee’s. Now I ain’t much of a hand at making speeches, but I know y’all know how important this mission is and I got a fair idea that all of you’re gonna be feeling all sorts of personal emotions and feelings. I reckon you wouldn’t be human if you didn’t have any sort of feeling about gettin’ revenge against the damnyankees. I want y’all to remember one thing, the folks back at home are counting on you and by golly we ain’t about to let them down. I tell you something else, I guess you’re all in line for some important promotions and personal citations when this thing is over with we do this right. That goes for ever’ last one of you great white boys.

Now let’s get this thing on the hump...we got some bombin’ to do.”

~***~ (I’m so sorry, I couldn’t resist. I was watching the film atm)

Commandant’s office. Deliverance Base
{date} 13:07am local time. D+67 minutes

Pinkard’s office was small enough... smaller than Jet’s own, she noticed, decorated with a few personal items that suggested Jeff Pinkard might actually be human. On the desk, was an old-style ring-dial phone, beside which was a brand-new Nokia. Open on the desk was the user’s manual, and an old dead-tree address book.

There was a number in there, for contacting Featherston... if absolutely necessary. Oh how sore a temptation that was for Jet, but don’t poke the bear, when you’re in the bear’s lair.

And not when the entire air force is a phone call away.

The leather chair was trashed. Jet was heavier than Jeff, so she stood. It was weird to see an office without a computer of some sort. It was all such a strange parachronism, with her dirtied futuristic helmet sitting beside an unguarded fan, a 1941 calendar depicting great Southern victories, alongside an antique fountain pen and ink-well.

Jet quietly slipped that one into the pouch strapped to her hip, along with Pinkard’s personally engraved sidearm which had been confiscated when he was arrested.

Opposite her, on a couch originally provided for guests, sat Lieutenant Heinz and Doctor Kenzō Tenma. Sabre’s avatar stood by the door and joining via radio was the Roughrider flight

commander, 'Skippy'.

"So, what's our status?" Jet asked them.

"Well," Tenma spoke up first, giving her an oddly critical eye, "The prison camp population seems to be in better condition than we expected. The high rate of... population turnover," the dirty euphemism for the extermination of existing prisoners and their replacement by newer arrivals immediately fixed itself in everyone's mind. "Means that most of the population hasn't been in the camp for more than a few months. Barracks six is the worst, and is being evacuated first. Unfortunately, boarding is going a good deal slower than planned. They're afraid of us."

A sigh.

"Most serious casualties are of a military nature. We've lost four people outright, and three could only be saved with emergency biomods. The Confederates are in worse shape." He glared at Jet, "Fifty-two of them are dead, mostly impact and blade injuries." a pause.

The cyborg was oddly expressionless.

"Others are gunshot wounds. Confederate wounded are doing well," he glanced at Jet and the Lieutenant, ", and will stay that way if I have anything to say about it. Fifteen should make a full natural recovery with time. Five have required emergency biomods. We still have spare capacity enough to handle critical cases from the camp,"

Heinz spoke next.

"Alf will like his new fangs," he said, congenially, "Defence preparations are nearly complete. The machine guns in the towers are manned and since we have air support, I have teams working on re-orientating the two flak cannon to fire directly against enemy armour or ground forces. That should give us some punch, if they get inside the *Tyger's* guns."

The cyborg smiled. "Cool. What about arming liberated prisoners?"

"It's too dangerous. Very few know how to shoot properly, they'll just be a liability. Those who can..." he thought, "...we'll give them captured Treadgar rifles for the time being. It'll be a decent defence, but we won't be able to hold off a concerted assault for long. The camp is designed to defend against attacks from the inside, not the outside."

Jet nodded. "I'll have some of us," 'us' being the *Engels* "make a reconnaissance run over nearby towns and military bases. That'll give us an idea of how long we've got. How long will you need, doctor?"

Tenma considered, turning his finger over in the air as he turned figures over in his mind "Hard

to say. Hmmm... by the book, it's looking like eight hours, rather than the six we planned on." he looked around. "We may get faster as time goes on,"

"As fast as possible. The longer we're down here, the longer they have to fight back,"

"Agreed," Heinz nodded.

"That's not going to be easy," said the doctor, "We could do this faster, by evacuating all the barracks at once, but that will leave a large amount in the open while we count and triage them. We're risking hypothermia, it's not a warm night. So far we've been keeping them in the relative safety of their barracks, counting and triaging one barracks at a time. It's slower, but safer."

"We do not have an infinite amount of time here, doctor" said the lieutenant "If we get attacked on the ground before we finish loading, not only do we have a fighting retreat, but we lose people in the fight. We lose those we haven't reached and we lose the initiative. It's going to look like we've been thrown back to orbit. No matter how few are left behind, it's going to look to the world like we failed,"

Sabre's ears twitched. "I could hold off infantry and small numbers of tanks. The *Tyger* can hold off tanks and aircraft, but she'll be a giant bullseye grounded in the middle of the camp." Sabre paused for a moment. "If we have to we might have to just herd the rest straight aboard the *Tyger* and sort them out onboard."

"That'd be a God-awful panic," the doctor responded. "They'd run over our people as much as themselves, it'd be a disaster,"

Both sides had their point. In the movie world, the Doctor would get his way and be proved right, with the *Tyger* taking off just as Patton's tank army rumbled up to the gates. And maybe a teasing telegram sent to Featherston. Jet recalled some advice given to her about being in command. Life wasn't a film.

"Getting caught on the ground is too much of a risk," she stated, "The longer this takes, the bigger the risk. Do it as fast as you can, doctor,"

"Some may freeze to death,"

"Very few, compared to what happens if we get caught loading,"

"If."

"Just do it,"

"You could use some of the trucks to accelerate the process" the fox-tiger suggested,

“Especially from the further barracks,”

“We’re using them already, for those who can’t walk” said the doctor, “But there aren’t enough. they’ll have to make multiple trips to take an entire barrack’s worth, which’ll take longer than just walking them.”

“As fast as we can,” said Jet. She swallowed a nervous lump, “I don’t want to get caught down here,”

Tenma gave her a reluctant nod, “I’ll try round up some blankets from the guard’s barracks. Most of *them* won’t need them anyway,”

“There’s a lot of aircraft activity further north,” Skippy’s voice crackled across the radio, mingled with the drone of his plane’s engines, *“Mostly large bomber aircraft heading up the east coast, and a few internal flights. I’ve taken the liberty of forwarding a warning to Philadelphia, but they could be making a run on any East Coast city. Northern air forces are reacting.”*

“Going for HQ?” wondered Sabre aloud.

“Six Blade Shadow is having electrical problems, she’ll have to return to base. Blu squadron are either going to have to land on Tyger, or bug out to bases in the north.”

“Tyger can take them,” Sabre assured, his ears twitching as he double-checked that. “It’ll be tight, but there should be space in the forward bay when we’re loaded.”

“Great. Flying north onto an airbase could be hairy, and I don’t want to think about what would happen to any of them who get shot down by Hitlercorns.” a quick pause. *“So far though, there’s nothing that appears to be heading in our direction.”*

“Lucky for us,” commented Heinz, with a bit of a smirk, “We’d planned for an airborne attack within the first fifteen minutes. I’m hoping they’re just distracted by the fight up north, but my gut tells me they’re waiting on something.”

“Draka?” Tenma’s voice was flat.

“Maybe,” Jet answered, shrugging. “Maybe not. Intelligence was that they would be in the main attack. They don’t give two shits about a prison camp like this.... normally.” Jet blew a long sigh through her pursed lips, “But...”

“Military intelligence is an oxymoron...” the German Lieutenant finished for her. “Somebody with brains might be able to order some of them down here.”

Plan for the worst, hope for the best.

"The plan was for half of us to be in the camp at all times anyway. Five of us should be able to handle any Draka easily. Ordinary JLI in hardsuits can handle them even when outnumbered... we'll just tear them apart."

With that, Jet knew exactly what she'd be doing as soon as the *Burning Bright* was finished.

~***~

Pinkard stared at his feet, then up at the black with the automatic rifle looming over him. He could see the man's hands, even if his face was hidden behind some sort of gasmask. The trenchcoated guard looked down at him.

A flash of anger ran through his body. What right did that black yankee sonofabitch have to come in here and wreck his camp? Why were they attacking? And just what the hell were they doing with *his* goddamned prisoners?

His anger drowned under a rush of fear. Pinkard returned his gaze to his bloody feet. The former steelworker just couldn't get the image of that white-armoured Mysteron out of his mind. He couldn't shake the memory of what had happened to his two guards.

That.... that was God awful. Even thinking about it, it made him shudder with fear... a terror that rose up from the pit of his stomach and threatened to burst through his mouth. He tried to force it out of his mind but.... tell someone not to think about a blue horse, and the first thing they think about is a blue horse.

"Hey, just what the hell are you damnyankees goin to be doing with us anyway?" Mercer Scott demanded.

It was funny. Pinkard's fear dissolved, replaced by an indignant irritation with his subordinate for speaking out of turn. He stood up, adjusting his shirt as best he could with his bound hands.

"I'm the commandant of this camp," he stated, trying to hide his fear. "What are you going to do with my boys? What gives you the right to do this?"

The guard answered with the butt of his rifle, "Shut up, asshole!"

Pinkard landed on his ass, head still ringing.

"Hey *boy*, you show some respect!" someone hollered.

"Simmer down!" the second of the guards raised his rifle. "Or take it up with Mikhail Kalashnikov,"

"I bet you don't have the guts to do it, do ya?" the shouter challenged. "You can't bring yourself to squeeze the trigger on an unarmed man, can you?" The shouter smirked. "Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

"John you dumbass, don't antagonise them," Pinkard snapped back at him, recovering his wits. He sneered up at one of his captors, "So... what are you going to do with us?"

"You're prisoners of war." the captor stated, "And I don't care what they do to you. All I know is what I want to do to you boys. And trust me, anything they can do is better than that,"

~***~

Heinz took a breath, "The last problem we have are the Confederate prisoners. There's over a hundred of them. If they choose to start a fight, we're going to have trouble handling them. Some of our people aren't exactly helping matters either,"

"We did agree to follow the Geneva Conventions at the start," Tenma reminded the room.

Jet nodded, "We were also hoping the prisoners would be a little more subdued by the initial attack,"

"We can't board them early," Sabre said, running through the boarding plans in his mind. "For one thing, most of the crew left onboard are unarmed non-fighting types. I wouldn't bet against them trying to escape."

"Especially if we're attacked," Jet added. "While we're busy fighting off a Confederate attack, they'll make a run for it. Or worse."

"We were planning on hooding them anyway, before they board. We'll do that early. Maybe bind them lightly. We were putting it off because it's not a small job...it'll take about a half-hour...and we need those people elsewhere."

The cyborg turned to the doctor "Any objections?"

The doctor shook his head. "Not if they're not physically harmed."

"Alright," the gynoid nodded, "Let's do that."

"Yes ma'am." Heinz acknowledged, "It will however, take a little longer for the camp defenses to be established."

Just advising her of the consequences of the order, nothing more.

“Speaking of which. I’ll get that reconnaissance flight up and...”

“Deliverance Base, Skippy One,” the radio interrupted. “We’ve got enemy aircraft inbound... at least twenty. They just took off from a strip fifteen kilometres north of Alexandria. Estimate arrival at your location within five minutes.”

“Skippy One, Engel One, acknowledged,” Jet responded.

“Engel One. Red and Blue squadrons already moving to intercept. “

Sabre’s ears twitched “Moving *Tyger* to air defense mode. She’ll only fire once they are upon the camp.”

“I’m already ready for casualties,” the doctor said. “Just let them know they’re coming.

“And I’ll signal the alert in the camp,” said the lieutenant. “Get everyone under cover,”

“Sabre Two, Engel One,” Jet broadcast, “We’ve got enemy fighters. We need smoke over the inmate end of the camp. Can you do it?”

“I’ll try Jet....” Sierra responded, audible only to Jet herself “The wind’s a bit strong. I thought you’d forgotten about me out here.”

“Sorry,” the cyborg blushed, “I’ll make it up when we get home,”

“There is this scenario I’ve been meaning to try out....”

A cough drew Jet’s attention back to the room.

“I’ll...” she looked around, a little shamefaced, “I’ll have the Engels stay out of the aerial battle. The Zig’s should be able to handle it. Keep us in reserve, to surprise any Draka who might show up,”

A voice was giggling in her radio receiver.

~***~

Confederate Airforce, 372nd Fighter Group, 5 miles South of Esler AFB. Over Alexandria, Louisiana.

Twenty Confederate Hound-Dog fighters flew in formation, skimming just above the clouds.

Above them, the moon provided the barest minimum of light.

“Jimmy, Jimmy... look at the size of that thing! It’s like... like a dirigible”

They were ten miles out, and they could already see the yellow tiger-striped craft. It was lit up like a Christmas tree... they made no attempt to hide themselves. Lieutenant Commander Jimmy Thach looked up through his canopy window at the Hound Dog above him, one of its exhausts trailing a little blue oilsmoke.

“Yeah. Nice big ‘ol target for our 37’s,” he reassured the pilot. “Big mass a hydrogen like that should go off like a bomb,”

Truth was, he was more than a little concerned. Either these people were rank amateurs, or they were so confident of being able to defend themselves that they didn’t care. Prudence assumed the latter.

He scanned the sky ... noting a contrail thousands of feet above, arcing away to the east. It was far higher than any aircraft he’d ever seen. A hundred-thousand feet up, or more... it was little more than a sparkle in the moonlight.

He checked his instruments. All was well. Oil pressure a little high, but tolerable. The big V-engine behind him massaged his back. It was running at full throttle. They’d been chomping at the bit to get up and fighting ever since they’d seen it fly over... but planes didn’t fly without gas and didn’t shoot without ammo.

Back to the dirigible. Smoke was rising around it, forming an arc around the South end of the camp. Where they burning the place? Then why not bomb it? A smokescreen probably...

What were the damyankees hiding under it?

Roughriders Deliverance Flight, ‘Blu’ Squadron, 10 miles North of Deliverance Base, just South of Alexandria, Louisiana.

Blu 5 pilot Jake Kindle looked at the fighters far below, on both radar, and in the moonlight far below. One of them was highlighted with a targeting reticule. Marked for death. There were ten Zig fighters, five apiece in Red and Blu squadron. Each Zig had a pair of radar guided missiles mounted under their wings.

That made for twenty missiles.

There were twenty enemy planes.

By networking their computers, the Zigs could ensure that none of them were targeting the

same plane.

“Alright Deliverance Flight,” the flight leader’s voice hissed over the comm “Lets introduce these fine fellows to the concept of Radar Guided Air-to-Air Missiles. Fox Three!”

“Blu-4 Fox Three!” Jake pushed the trigger. A grinning fox appeared on his HUD as the missile howled away into the night.

For the first few seconds of its flight, SIM-250 missile rode the beam from the Zig’s radar, angling itself down towards its assigned target. A reactionless engine pushed it through the air at a speed approaching Mach 4, leaving nothing but the sound of a howling fox in its wake. No flame, no smoke, nothing to give away its presence other than a sound that’d never be heard by its victim.

A kilometre out from its assigned target, the 250 switched over to its internal homing. An onboard radar transmitter painted the slow moving target. For a missile designed to hit quick moving space-fighters, the Hound-Dogs were almost insultingly easy targets.

The missile placed itself in the estimated path of its target aircraft which was conscientiously flying straight and level, counting down the distance between itself and its victim. Ten metres out, its sensor array activated, scanning the aircraft for its vulnerable points, picking out wings, fuel, pilot, engines and controls with the blink of an electronic eye. It compared these with its programmed mission objectives, calculated an optimal attack pattern, and aimed itself for a point above the aircraft.

Once there, the Slade type-242 ‘Starbust’ warhead detonated, sending a blast of hardened shrapnel aimed straight for the aircraft’s engine.

It ripped through the tops of the block, passing through the supercharger, carburettor and... unfortunately, the aircraft’s rearmost fuel tank. High Octane aviation fuel began to spray freely, meeting the wreckage of the engine.

Jimmy Thach damned near jumped out of his cockpit when his wingman disintegrated into a blazing red fireball and so much tinfoil, without so much as a flash of a tracer.

Two more aircraft spiralled out of control, while another augured towards the ground, its propeller stopped dead.

From his cockpit, Jake saw four of the enemy just explode. Fortune of war. The missiles were only supposed to kill the engines, leaving the pilot unharmed and the aircraft still controllable. But, mix explosives and avgas with a fast moving target, and that was far from guaranteed.

Five others began to dive in towards the ground as they were supposed to. He watched as the

pilots bailed themselves out, counting one, two, three, four chutes slowly following their planes down. The final target got off lucky with only a torn-up wing thanks to a fortunate accident

All twenty spacecraft fired their second missiles, within the space of about a second.

~***~

"Dear God What was that?" Jimmy didn't even realise he'd spoken for a moment, "Hit the deck, hit the deck!"

Get down fast before whoever or whatever it was fired again. He firewalled his throttle, pushing the nose of his aircraft down into a corkscrew while banking hard to the right at the same time. The V-12 roared behind him, supercharger howling, G-forces pinned him back painfully to his seat.

"Where'd that come from? Where'd that come from?" a voice demanded, on the verge of panic.

"It's some damnyankee mysteron zap-gun bullshit,"

"Get a hold of yourselves!" he barked over the radio. "Keep a sharp lookout,"

No sooner had he said it, than he saw it. In the moonlight, a small cylinder, a good-bit bigger than a ground-attack rocket. A few hundred feet out, and moving damned fast. In instinct, he reversed his roll, inverting the corkscrew.

The Hound-Dog snapped over, pivoting around its central engine. Blue flames licked from the exhausts, scorching the paint. Alloy framing creaked and groaned with the strain, Jimmy grimacing as the ground began to fill his view.

Explosions ripped the night sky above. Thach braced himself, offering up a quick prayer to the Lord to carry him through. The rocket detonated. He felt the shockwave pass through his body, chased by a sound from behind that reminded him of rain pattering on a tin roof

Something burst into flame far above him.

And then... a heartbeat later, he was astonished to find he was still alive. He hauled back hard, hoping to stay that way, skimming the tops of the trees. First, he checked his own plane. Gauges were good. Controls seemed to respond normally. Fuel didn't appear to be leaking. He risked a glance back, seeing a few holes in the empennage..... but nothing serious.

Whatever it was had gone straight through the back of the plane and out the other side.

"Boys, who's still with me?" he called out over the radio.

"Green 4, barely," came back one.

"Green 5, here," another.

"Red 5. I've got damage but I'm hanging in here," a third.

"Red 9, It missed,"... a pause... "I think,"

More voices came over the radio, bailing out... or going in hard. Three others were bugging out as best they can, most of the back parts of their planes torn to hell and back, and Red 5 was losing fuel.

He quelled a building panic as best he could.... trying his best to hide his own fears.

"Alright! Let's figure out where those damned rockets came from and see how much they like our guns."

He was reasoning fast. Whoever they were, they were firing from a distance... and probably from above. If they had guided rockets like that, capable of firing from a stand-off position, they might not be very good in a dogfight. Their planes might not even be very maneuverable. And if those rockets were the planes' primary armament, chances they would have light secondary armaments.

In truth, he was just looking for an excuse to get into the fight and get revenge. Everything else was just a rationalisation of that one desire.

The radio hissed. "I see 'em. Three O'Clock, Very high. Just about to cross the moon,"

"Roger,"

Just twinkling spots, high above. So, they had the altitude and speed advantage. What did he have?

"We'll draw them down onto us, then trap them with that new manoeuvre we've been practicin'. They're gonna be confident. We can use that against them to give 'em a bloody nose before getting the hell out of here."

"Hell yeah! We ain't no pushovers Jimmy,"

~***~

"*Five bogeys still in the air,*" Dizzy in Blu-5 said... a little amazed than any had made it. "*Tough*

ol' birds,"

"Looks like they're trying to make a fight of it still," another cut in.

The remaining Hound Dogs powered up towards them, two of the birds trailing smoke but still flying.

"Looks like we'll have to do this the old-fashioned way," said the flight leader. Jake could hear the grin on his face, *"Switch to guns. Stay out of their forward arc unless you feel like adding some extra ventilation to your Zig."*

Jake pressed the throttle as far towards 'loud' as he could managed... acceleration forces squashing him back against the seat. Approaching the sound barrier, he throttled back, winging the Zig over onto a steep dive. He glanced at his radar, checking on the Hound Dogs. The old planes were doing their God-damnedest to chase after them.

They hadn't a hope in out-maneuvering a Zig.

Jake had the altitude. He had control. It was almost too easy to line up one of the planes in his gunsights. He pushed the little red button on the stick. The coilgun spat Iridium darts, each one with a small burning tracer in its space.

He exulted as he saw the impacts splash across the tail of silver plane.

They punched straight through the aluminium skin, through the hollow spaces inside, before punching their way back out again. The net effect of the attack on the Hound Dog, was a little extra ventilation in the compartment behind the engine, a fuel leak that sealed itself moments later and a few kph trimmed off its top speed thanks to the extra drag.

"Son of a bitch," he spat, as he roared past the confederate aircraft.

~***~

Jimmy winced as he heard the bullets hit, spattering across his tail like stones on a tin roof. He checked his controls, rolling his plane left first, then right... before glancing at his gauges. Nothing seemed out...

Nothing at all.

He craned his head over, catching sight of the oddly configured enemy fighter. It seemed to be little more than a cockpit, a small engine and some wings. No wonder the damn things were so maneuverable. Thinking quick, he figured that something that small had to be pretty damned lightweight. No space for big guns. Something that small had to be pretty damned complex

inside. Hit it, and you're doing damage to something critical. Engine, pilot or fuel... there wasn't space at all in it for much else.

His Hound Dog was a big damn plane, with plenty of space for bullets to just pass through and through. His Hound Dog was a safe plane, once you knew how to handle its quirks. His Hound Dog was armed with a 37mm cannon, a pair of .50 calibre guns and four .30 calibres in the wings.

The way he figured, he only had to hit one of those small fighters to knock it out. He keyed in his mic.

"Boys, I think we're still in with a fighting chance here. I wanna try that manoeuvre we've been planning"

A few voices answered in the affirmative. Maybe they'd figured the same thing. Whatever the hell they'd been shot with first was God awful terrifying, but those little planes were almost definitely out of it.

Now it was the Hound Dog's chance to bare its fangs.

He pushed his aircraft low to the ground, building speed and gaining energy. Another one of those little fighters was coming in on his tail, trying to take a nibble.

Even if they didn't have much in the way of firepower, they'd still kill him with a thousand cuts. Treetops flashed passed as he pushed his plane over into a bank, first to the left, then to the right. Energy bled away while that little bug stuck to his tail like glue.

Pulling up hard might give his enemy a firing solution, but he couldn't run on the ground all day...

"Red 5, where y'at?"

"Behind you and high. I can see you."

Pulling up would slow him down, giving the chasing enemy an easy target. Something no pilot could resist. He'd bet the house his pursuer would follow him into this...

~***~

"Damn he's good," Jake muttered to himself. His Zig just wanted to go!... the hardest part of getting a good firing solution on these slow old things was keeping the speed down so he didn't overshoot.

He throttled back as he followed the Hound Dog, skimming between treetops. It banked

desperately and he followed, sweeping after it. Jake passed up on a few chances... he knew he had to make his hits count.

His coilgun just couldn't damage the Hound Dog fast enough with the solid ammunition he was loaded with.

Another bank, and he kept on its tail. It was easy going for a Zig.

(Search and Rescue launched... Jet boosts off to do it with some of her unit, while others scout out local bases. Heinz and Tenma talk to the camp's population)

Jefferson Pinkard couldn't see a damn thing. As soon as the fireworks had stopped, they'd stuffed a hood over his head and herded him into a small narrow room. There was a loud roaring sound, the room swayed, and that was all Jeff could sense for the next hour. Some of the other guards cursed, some moaned, some prayed to a God that they weren't sure was listening. Jeff didn't bother. If the damnyankees and their Kraut and Mysteron buddies were going to do something to them, he wouldn't give them the satisfaction of fear.

He figured that they were taking him to a prison camp somewhere, probably on damnyankee soil. Jeff couldn't help but laugh bitterly at the irony; he'd spent half the Great War on the front lines and had barely so much as seen a damnyankee. Now, with the bombs just falling and the barrels just rolling, he was in Yankee hands. His 'war' this time around had lasted a grand total of three minutes.

Soon enough the swaying sensation died away, and a loud clanging sound came from outside the room. A few minutes after that, Jeff heard the door open and men – probably well-armed men by the sound of their boots – entered. "Which one's Pinkard?" said one of the men, voice low and angry. Jeff found himself getting picked up and roughly frog-marched out of the room and down a series of halls. Eventually, they came to their destination, and he was shoved into a chair.

"Take that thing off him, we're not barbarians," said a new voice, this one much more mild and to Jeff's surprise, tinged with a faint Alabama accent.

Jeff winced as the hood came off. Blinking rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the light, he found himself in a room with rounded walls, like a huge water tank. At the head of the table was a slight man with a neat black moustache. And behind the man...

Jeff Pinkard stared at the Earth turning outside the window. The other man smiled thinly. "Welcome to Mysteron country, Mr. Pinkard."

"Wh-wh-wh-" Jeff sputtered.

"In order," the other man said, "you're in Processing Station #1, which is in orbit some four hundred miles above the Earth. We brought you here as a prisoner of war, and we are the Mysterons."

"The hell you're a Mysteron!" Jeff cried. "You're a traitor to your country and your race! I know that accent; you're a Birmingham fella like me!"

"I am *nothing* like you, you mass-murdering bastard," the man snapped back, his Alabama accent thickening. "And my country was the United States of America; now it's the Fenspace Convention, and we don't like people who slaughter innocents up here."

Jeff blinked. "Innocents? Those were rebels, and just niggers besides. Who cares about niggers?"

The man's face darkened, then with a visible effort he composed himself. "Your country is about to find out *exactly* who cares, Mr. Pinkard."

"You treasonous Yankee-loving son of a bitch," Jeff said it with as much venom as he could. "Jake Featherston'll kick your asses all the way back to Mars!" He hoped that the other man might lose his cool again, maybe give him a chance to escape.

Unfortunately for Jeff, it didn't work. "That remains to be seen," the man said. "Your war is over, however. We'll be moving you on to a nice prison camp we've set up very far away from the Confederate States and any hope of rescue." The man smiled again, and this time it was downright nasty. "Since you're something of an innovator in prison design, I'll be fascinated to hear your critique."