

2125: Land of the Brave

Chapter 1: The World As It Is

--O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave--

The missile arched across the sky from the roof of the White House, struck the rear of Marine One, and detonated. The helicopter broke into flaming pieces and fell toward the Potomac River. While Beetle was still trying to rationalize what he had seen, Matron Panic had jumped to her feet and run toward the river bank. Beetle finally got up on his feet and followed her. At the riverside, she pulled off her boots and jumped into the water. "Stop! They have to be dead, Pam!" But she did not waver as she swam amid the chunks of wreckage that had not sunk immediately. An explosion rocked the far side of the river as one of the fuel tanks from the flyer blew to pieces. Beetle covered his ears and winced from the deafening blast.

Seconds later, he noticed that Matron Panic was headed back to shore with a body. Beetle moved into the water to assist her. He took the body, carried it to shore, and set it on the grass. Sirens began to wail all over Washington DC. Beetle looked down on the form of Acton Marshall as Panic performed the kiss of life. "Bob, get your ass down here and tell me if you feel a pulse!" she exclaimed and then went back to performing CPR. He knelt on the ground and pressed his fingers against Marshall's wrist and neck. He heard screaming and looked up. Hundreds of people were exiting a subway station and charging toward the Jefferson Memorial. "Are you getting anything?"

"Wait, I feel something. Holy fuck, he's alive! We've got to get him out of here now!"

Panic looked up to argue with him and noticed they were now surrounded by hundreds of ragged slum dwellers. Everywhere she looked, there were more vagrants milling around and smashing anything they could. She stood up. "Look what they've done to my friend! We were just here on break from cleaning toilets in the Capitol Building, and they tried to kill us!"

Beetle pointed. "There's the Capitol! Let's go kill those motherfuckers! Are you with me?" He started away, and the crowd rushed ahead of him. After a few steps, he stopped and returned. "We have to get out of the city now."

Panic stood and kissed Beetle softly on the lips. "You're right, Bob darling. I only hope Acton survives the trip." He picked up his friend and the three headed toward the subway station and freedom.

It had been a year and a half since the assassination of President Acton Marshall and the assault on the Kennedy farm west of Delano. While Jack Kennedy had not heard from the caliph or his friend Adnan in almost a year, he had heard the news that their actions to defeat the gangs of Utopia were ongoing. There had been no news from the Olympians since the S units returned to the Northwest to rebuild after the nuclear strike. All of the fighting and struggling that began on July 3, 2121, seemed forever locked in the past. Still, the caliph's final words to him fought for his attention. Jack had been inspecting the corn crop when he received the call from Caliph Ahmed bin Abdul Aziz. Before the call disconnected, the caliph had said, "The danger is

beginning again, my Son. If you want to be free, you must be brave and ready to fight.” Yet nothing had happened in the area for a year now.

“Jack, what are you thinking about?”

He turned his head and smiled at his girlfriend, Alexis Johnson, seated next to him on the airliner. “Nothing much, Alex. I was just remembering the last time I heard from the caliph. I hope he is okay.”

Alexis squeezed his hand and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m sure he’s fine, and I’m glad that his army of professional soldiers are fighting the craziness now instead of us.”

Alexis’ mother, Alice, who was seated at the aisle next to her daughter, said, “This peace is what we’ve all been hoping for. For a long time, I didn’t know if any of us would survive. Jack, remember that is why we came to Calnevona. Life is supposed to be normal.” Jack nodded and then turned his head to look out the window.

A woman’s voice spoke over the speakers, “This is Captain Sylvia Jackson. We are making our final approach into San Antonio International Airport. Thank you for flying with South Texas Airlines. Have a nice day.”

“I’m so glad you came with me, Jack. I wish you would reconsider going to college too.”

He smiled as he raised his seatback. “Alex, you know I love farming. I think more school would be a waste of time. Besides, with you here, your dad and mine will need a lot of help.”

Alice said, “Jack, you know what Alexis means is she will miss you so far away.”

“I know, Mrs. Johnson, and I will miss her like crazy too. Hopefully, Alex will graduate and come back to Delano, even though her career prospects might be limited.”

Alexis frowned. “Jack, do you think we might grow apart? I guess I never considered that.”

“We don’t know the future, Alex, but we both get to choose what we want to do. Either way, I suppose we have to live in the world as it is. I’m just glad the cannibal craziness is over for now.”

A few minutes later, Jack, Alexis, and Alice were working their way up the aisle toward the exit with other passengers in front and behind them. As Jack reached the front of the line, he saw the pilot and crew wishing everyone a good day. There was something strange about the expression on the captain’s face. She seemed to recognize him, but Jack could not remember having seen her before. “Thanks for flying with us,” the woman said with a smile.

“Thanks, Captain,” Jack replied and began moving up the ramp toward the terminal building. Because they had carried on their luggage, once in the terminal, they headed toward the exit where Mary Ann Marshall had promised to be waiting for them.

After the last passengers had deplaned, Sylvia Jackson pulled her roller board into the terminal and headed for the exit. Her copilot said, “So, you are on vacation for a couple of weeks, right, Sylvia?”

“That’s right, Billy. I can’t wait to get home. I haven’t been to Oklahoma in ages.”

“Have fun then, and I’ll see you in the skies in a couple of weeks,” the copilot replied. He slid his badge into a reader, opened a door, stepped through, and closed the door after him.

Sylvia pulled out her phone and dialed. When a man’s voice answered, she said, “Bob, you are not going to believe who I just saw getting off my last flight.”

“If it wasn’t that bastard Darren Connor, I’m not sure I care.”

She laughed and said, “I don’t think we’ll ever be that lucky. It was Jack Kennedy. I still remember his picture from the wanted posters.”

The man replied, "That is pretty funny. I'll tell the boss. By the way, I'm out at the curb right now."

"Okay, I'll be there in a few."

"Holy shit!"

"What happened?"

"Sylvia, you won't believe whose car I just saw that Kennedy kid get into. It was freaking Mary Marshall."

"The one who lived," she replied with a sigh. "It's a small world for sure. I'll meet you out front."

An hour later, Jack, Mary, Alexis, and Alice were seated at a small café across the street from the campus of South Texas University. As Jack took a bite of his burger, Mary said, "I am so glad you're coming to the campus this fall, Alex. The last year has been amazing, and I know you'll have a great time too."

"Thanks, Mary, and I'm glad we get to be roommates. It will make the transition a lot easier for me."

Alice asked, "What was it you were talking about in your email, Mary? It was something about the president of the university."

"It was pretty strange, Mrs. Johnson. Someone told him that Alex and Jack were coming here for orientation, and the president insisted on meeting us personally before the afternoon session."

"You see, Alex, you're famous here already!" Jack said with a grin. "Mary, who is the president of the university?"

"I'm not sure. I heard that Doctor Farnsworth retired over the summer. I haven't seen an announcement about his replacement yet."

"That is odd," Alice noted. "I suppose we'll find out why he wanted to see us soon enough."

At one o'clock in the afternoon, the group was led into president's office. Jack was stunned to see his friend, Ted Bush Figueroa, standing behind the desk. Ted had been the president of South Texas for many years. Jack had first met him at the Last Chance Restaurant when the convoy from Co-op M-125 arrived at the Mexican border. Bush hurried around his desk, shook Jack's hand, and then hugged him. "It's great to see you again, Jack." He turned to the others and said, "Jack and I go way back. I am Doctor Bush, the new university president."

At that same time, a line of caliphate tanks and armored personnel carriers moved into the dome over Washington DC, securing their control over the eastern seaboard from there south to the tip of Florida and as far west as Pittsburgh and Atlanta. Once the coast was secured, caliphate ships began to dock and unload more soldiers as well as much needed food and medicine for the desperate citizenry.

At four o'clock in the afternoon, Bob turned off the highway and onto a small road. After a mile, the car crested the top of a small hill and began down the gently sloping road. At the bottom of the hill, a small river moved beneath a concrete bridge and flowed further east. One hundred yards past the river, a chain-link fence topped with razor-wire blocked their path. A single guard stood inside a shack. A second guard was aiming a fifty-caliber machine gun at them from an emplacement on the roof of the shack. As the car neared the gate in the fence, the

man on top of the shack stood and saluted. The other guard rushed to pull open the fence. Bob lowered his side window and shook the guard's hand, and then they proceeded up the next hill toward a compound with several structures. After Bob parked the car, he and Sylvia exited and headed toward the largest building. A light drizzle began to fall, so they hurried to the door and entered.

A woman behind a desk smiled broadly as she stood and saluted. "Lord Beetle, welcome home."

"Thank you, Pam, but I thought we decided not to use those names anymore."

"I'm sorry, Bob, but it just seems odd to use your given name." She frowned and looked down.

Bob put his arm around her shoulders and hugged her. "You will always be Matron Panic to me too." He kissed her cheek and she blushed. "Can we see the boss?"

"He's been waiting for you both."

Bob and Sylvia walked up a flight of stairs and headed to the end of a short hallway. He tapped on the door, opened it, and they walked inside.

Acton Marshall was sitting in a wheelchair. Doctor Dennis Cassidy was standing nearby. Marshall said, "Hi there." Sylvia was about to rush forward to greet him, but she stopped when he motioned for her to stay where she was. The doctor brought a walking frame over and placed it in front of the wheelchair. Marshall slowly pulled himself up onto the frame and started to move forward slowly. It took more than a minute from him to cross the six feet between them. "I missed you, darling." They kissed. Acton motioned with his eyes and the doctor moved the wheelchair behind Marshall who sat with a grunt.

"You're doing great, honey!" Sylvia said with a broad smile. "He's doing great, isn't he, Doctor?"

"His progress is very promising, Ms. Jackson. It shouldn't be more than a few months before Mr. Marshall will be on his own two feet again for good." He put his hand on Marshall's shoulder and said, "I'll see you tomorrow morning." He then nodded and left the room.

"I'll give you guys some time alone," Bob said and left the room as well.

Sylvia pulled a chair over and sat in front of Marshall. "Acton, I want to quit the airline and stay here with you. You always told me you wanted to get married, and I think now is as good a time as any. You know how lucky you are to be alive."

"This isn't how I expected it to be, Sylvia," he began. "I was thinking of a wedding in the Rose Garden until that bastard tried to assassinate me. In one instant, I went from being President of the United States to a nothing invalid. If it hadn't been for Bob and Pam, I would never have survived."

"Honey, I know you told me they saved you, but you never told me the whole story."

Marshall moved his chair across the room and behind a desk. He took a tissue from his desk and wiped away a stray tear. "They broke the rules, Sylvia, and thank goodness they did. Pam is at least ten years older than Bob and me, but they were always attracted to each other. In Los Muertos, the queen alone would decide who could mate and who could have children. They knew my mother would never allow them to be together, so they had been sneaking away from time to time. The day that man video-recorded the inside of the Atlanta Society, they had gone on a picnic near the Potomac. They had no idea what was going on outside the dome. They did not know that hundreds of thousands of people were trying to invade and kill everyone. Pam saw Marine One take off from the White House grounds and head toward the opening in the dome. Bob was telling her a funny story when she motioned toward it. Just as the flyer was crossing the

river, they saw the missile coming from the roof of the White House. Then I saw the helicopter explode all around me, and I blacked out.

"It was two days later before I woke up in the slums of Baltimore. Somehow, Bob, Pam, and Doc were able to escape the madness." Marshall wiped away more tears. "Bob said my mother and Saliq likely died instantly when the missile detonated. It's taken me more than a year to get as well as I am. Now, I know that Dog was playing us the entire time." He withdrew a pistol from his desk and aimed it at Sylvia. "You were one of his most loyal followers, weren't you?"

"Acton, please put that away. I swear I am with you now. If Dog really did this to you, let me go to St. Louis and cut his head off for you."

Marshall smiled, slipped the pistol back into the desk, and then moved over to her again. "Actually, I have another plan, Sylvia. I want you to get Dog and bring him here to me. Prove that you love me by doing that, and we will get married immediately. That I promise."

"You know something that you're not telling me."

He smiled broadly. "The war with the caliphate is not going well, darling. There is no way his stupid Utopia can survive. There is a rumor that he is going to San Antonio to beg for help from the new United States or Mexico."

"There's no way either would support him," Sylvia scoffed.

"You'd be surprised, my dear. He already used his silver tongue to rid himself of Frank Dawson, my uncle, my mother, and almost me. His only mistake so far was to trust his top commanders to stay in line. There's as much fighting among them as there is with the caliphate."

"How can you be so sure? He never struck me as a genius."

He put his hands on her knees and stared into her eyes. "This whole thing has been a game for Darren Connor. Do you remember who the president was before that moron Frank Dawson?"

"Wasn't it Oliver Conrad?"

Marshall nodded and smiled. "He is Darren's father. All Darren had to do was slightly change his last name. So, he was inside the domes and knew where the money was. He also knew the elites, many of them personally. He brought the different gangs together to keep the elites in power by taking hope away from the masses. He tied the cannibals to the cities so there would be meat. And when the time was ripe, he convinced Dawson to leave office."

Shaking her head, Sylvia said, "I can't believe he did all of that."

"And the Orenites were the biggest dupes of all. He convinced us that he was our friend, but we were just pawns in his game. Even before Uncle Oren and Mom boarded the first flight out of Portland, Dog knew about the slaughterhouses in Clarksville and Atlanta. If he had told us, we would have stayed in the Northwest or found another country to rebuild our hive. But he hid the truth so we would come and take the fall, leaving only Dog and his millions of police in charge of everything." He sighed deeply and looked up at a photograph of his mother on the wall. "I still remember Dog begging Mom to kill her brother. That asshole was getting impatient! That should have been a sign. And when he told us he knew nothing about those other slaughterhouses, I should have known that was a lie." He turned to Sylvia. "I mean we were on the West Coast and knew nothing about the rest of the country. He was in charge of all the gangs throughout the country. Of course, he knew!" He smiled. "I guess it took a missile up my butt to open my eyes and see the world as it is."

"Honey, what do you want me to do?" Sylvia asked.

"I have some agents in San Antonio. Do you remember Barry Tompkins?" She shook her head. "He was a loyal Zombie who failed me a couple of times. He's back on my payroll and

works at a coffee shop named Dingo's across the street from South Texas University. I'm sure you remember his girlfriend, Mary Ann Marshall."

"The one who lived."

Marshall nodded. "Yeah, that's her. Anyway, Barry is part of my squad of twenty there. He can connect you to the others. They are all looking for information about when Dog will come to the city. You need to come up with a plan to kidnap him and bring him here."

"I'll do my best to make you proud, sweetheart. When do I leave?"

"I hope you agree to stay with me tonight, darling. I have missed you."

"Acton, I will be with you as long as we both shall live."

Ted Bush Figueroa invited Jack and his group to his home for dinner that evening. It was the first time Jack had met Ted's wife, Lucille. After a sumptuous barbeque dinner, Jack and Ted were on the front porch while the women enjoyed dessert and coffee in the house. Jack was sitting while Ted stood at the edge of the porch gazing around the campus. After a minute, he turned and said, "Jack, do you think the caliphate wants to take over the country?"

"I don't think so, Ted. The last time I spoke with Ahmed, he told me he wanted to destroy the gangs and help restore the US."

Ted looked down for a moment and sighed. "From what I hear, Ahmed is now back in Riyadh, trying to quell other branches of his family. General Ibrahim Nasser is now in charge over here. His forces just marched into Washington this afternoon. King Darren Connor wants to meet with our leaders. He wants us to join forces with him to repel the caliphate. He is convinced the caliphate wants to add America to their territory."

"So, we either support the gangs or the caliph, either one of which could turn on us."

Ted nodded. "Yeah, that's pretty much it."

"Well, I would still trust Ahmed more. He ended the caliphate jihad that his father started and turned over Las Vegas, his only other stronghold. From where I sit, it seems that Connor has been out for power all along. His gangs helped Oren Marshall's family by rounding up Old Ones for the slaughterhouse for years. He got Frank Dawson to resign and put Oren and Acton in the White House. Now he is running the country."

"That's what Sammy said too."

"Who is Sammy, Ted?"

"General Samuel Lincoln Kahn is now the overall commander of the military of the United States. He was one of the prisoners that the robots helped to free from the Atlanta Society a year or so ago. You'll be meeting him soon. Jack, do you know why I'm not president of the Republic of South Texas anymore?" Jack shook his head. "South Texas and Calnevena are officially becoming the United States of America tomorrow. John Winston will be president of the whole thing."

"You would have made a great president too, Ted."

Ted walked over and sat on a second chair. "Thanks Jack, that's very kind. John actually offered the job to me, but I have had enough of government. You told me long ago how you saw that video I made in 2105. Well, I was elected in 2104, so I've been in government more than twenty years. That's enough. But I work with all of them almost every day. Each of us must help our leaders to make the right choices."

Jack looked down and sighed softly. Finally, he looked up at Ted and asked, "Can I tell you something the caliph told me the last time I heard from him? I haven't told anyone before."

"Of course, Jack, I can keep it a secret too."

“He said the danger was about to begin again and that I had to be ready to fight.” Ted looked stunned. “That was at least a year ago, and nothing has happened yet. Do you think the danger has passed by now?”

“That’s a hell of a question, Jack. Obviously, I don’t know if Ahmed knew of a specific threat that existed then, but it is clear that the situation here isn’t so good. There are ten gang city-states fighting for hegemony and a massive caliphate army moving our way. I have even heard that some gangs are becoming cannibalistic again. President Winston is rebuilding the military, but that’s a long-term project.

“If something bad were to happen to Ahmed and his nephew, things could get horribly bad. Even though Oren, his sister, and nephew were killed, there were millions of Orenites. They have to be somewhere. Unfortunately, you and I were born into rough times. If we can somehow turn things around, perhaps there can be real peace. But it is going to be very hard for a long time.”

The front door opened, and the ladies stepped outside. Alice Johnson said, “Come on, Jack. It’s getting late, so we should head back to the hotel.” After everyone said good night, they got into their car and drove away.

“How did your chat with Jack go, dear?” Lucille asked.

“I think you and I should have a drink, honey. It’s a long story.”

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