

Helicopters circled the night sky, their searchlights arcing over the streets of Downtown. Downtown, that euphemistic name for the sprawling, dilapidated mass of buildings that seemed to stretch beyond the horizon. Out of this manmade jungle rose the skyscrapers of Central District, and around them, the Wall. That was how everyone thought of it – no mere nameless structure, but a proper noun with a capital ‘W’. You only had to look at it to see how it had acquired such a status. It stood several stories high, an ugly, enormous edifice of interlocking concrete slabs crowned with wicked-looking barbed wire and set with watchtowers at regular intervals. Around it stretched a barren expanse of a hundred feet or more, bulldozed and flattened to the point of featurelessness. Visored sentinels patrolled relentlessly about its edge, accompanied by vicious-looking dogs. Apart from a few patches of defiant graffiti, its monotonous visage was broken only by a few heavily armed checkpoints, asphalt roads leading off into the slums.

At the edge of the wasteland a youth ducked back into the shadows of an alley as a searchlight’s beam swept past. There was nothing technically illegal about standing there, but the first thing you learnt if you grew up in Downtown was that technicalities didn’t matter a damn. If the guards spotted you near the perimeter after dark the sirens would go off and the dogs would be let loose. Runners that weren’t torn to shreds or shot in the back would be arrested on some spurious charge – loitering, perhaps – and hauled in to face the tender mercies of the A.P.Es.

As the beam moved on the youth slid forward to resume watching one of the checkpoints. He was thin, ginger-haired and pale, nineteen perhaps, wrapped in an ill-fitting trench coat that had seen better days. He wheezed slightly as he watched the checkpoint, his respiratory system another victim of Downtown’s pollution. As he watched, the barriers at the checkpoint began to rise, their lights blinking. Five bulky vans with blacked-out windows sped through.

The youth slipped away, sticking to the shadows as he moved down the alley. He emerged into a litter-clogged street. It was devoid of life; even the winos and junkies knew better than to sleep rough this close to the Wall. He hastened down the sidewalk, skirting piles of long-rotting garbage bags, his breathing laboured. At the end of the second block he came across a populated road and turned right. He spoke to nobody, the collar of his coat turned up as he moved swiftly past the late-night pedestrians. He slowed near a backstreet before looking around to see if he was being watched, then darted into it, passing overflowing dumpsters and mouldering boxes. It led to the back of a building that had once been some kind of industrial warehouse, its brick walls blackened with grime and tagged by the ever-present graffiti. He came to a metal door and knocked; two taps in quick succession, a pause, then another tap. There was the sound of a latch being drawn from the other side, and then it opened. The youth stepped inside and quickly shut the door behind him.

He walked up a narrow flight of stairs to the first floor. The gutted building had been converted into a makeshift command post. One corner had been partitioned off by mesh

fencing. Computer monitors hummed as a wiry, bespectacled man tapped untiringly at a keyboard, the green light from the monitors reflecting off his glasses so that he looked like some weird, bug-eyed alien. A rack on one wall held an arsenal of small arms. In the centre people stood around an enormous table covered by maps of the city, notes, and battered, bulky computer tablets. In another corner a vidscreen set to Central News stood propped on a crate, half a dozen people sitting around it on decrepit sofas.

“Can you believe they’re trying to push this bull, man?” sneered a man in a sleeveless leather jacket. He gesticulated at the vidscreen. The news had moved on from covering a wildfire to the unfolding riot at PharmaCorp’s warehouse in north Downtown.

“Live updates on the disturbance in Downtown,” the news anchor – a woman in a red suit whose face held the unmistakable hint of plastic surgery – was saying. “Several employees at a warehouse are being held hostage by violent rioters outside. The police have been dispatched and the situation is being monitored carefully. The reason for the rioting is unknown, though subversive activity is suspected.”

No one bothered to answer the man. They could all believe that Central News was pushing this bull. The youth looked at the vidscreen then walked over to one of the men standing at the central table. He was in his sixties, with unruly hair and a grey beard, wearing a faded US Army jacket. He looked up from a map he was studying.

“They’re moving?” he asked, his voice a gruff murmur.

The youth nodded.

“How many?”

“Five.”

The man nodded, turning to a woman sitting at an old two-way radio.

“Get everyone out of there when they get to Main Street. It’ll be tight, but they need to stick around to make sure the APEs aren’t going to turn back if they feel like the show’s over.”

She nodded, not looking up. The man – ‘Doc’ they called him, or, just as often, ‘that tough old bastard’ – turned to look over at the vidscreen. He sighed tiredly, rubbing the bridge of his nose. The woman on the vidscreen was speaking to her co-host, a sweaty man in a suit whose piggish eyes squinted at her lasciviously. They were discussing the riot at the warehouse.

“It’s the goddamn Subversives,” the co-host hollered, jowls shaking indignantly as he spat the words out. “These parasites are a menace to society! They’re sponging off of honest, hard-working citizens like you and me! If those brave men and women trapped in that warehouse are watching this, I want to tell them right now to hang tight – the cavalry’s on its way.”

*Yeah, that's right. Hang tight, boys,* thought Doc sarcastically. There were no workers in the warehouse, of course; it was all automated. The only brave working men and women on PharmaCorp's premises were the well-paid private security goons, protected merely by half a dozen blast-proof doors, a fleet of stun drones and the hefty submachine guns they carried. With these meagre resources, they were totally at the mercy of a crowd comprised of the destitute, sick and elderly protesting against the recent price hike of emphysema drugs. To those in Downtown who couldn't afford insurance (and who could?) it was a death sentence, an RSVP to pneumonia, heart strain and other complications.

The presenters on Central News were right about one thing, though. The protest *had* been organised by Subversives. A maintenance technician on a zero-hours contract at the warehouse had needed money to pay for his mother's cataract surgery, and in exchange for a bribe had tipped off Doc's outfit that haulage trucks suspiciously 'loaned' from the Department of Defence were being used to ferry medical supplies into Central. As a result of some generous backroom palm-greasing, a legal loophole and some surreptitious blackmail, it transpired that PharmaCorp could somehow claim a healthy tax rebate for every delivery of medical supplies thus transported. *That's your tax dollars at work right there, folks,* Doc reflected.

Doc's outfit had seized the opportunity. Usually all corporate shipments to Central were made via the monorails, arteries of the inner city that ran above the filth of Downtown and clean over the top of the Wall. They were nearly impossible to hit; each station was a mass of security cameras and scanners, defended by a suite of guards equipped with enough firepower to launch a small war. That PharmaCorp would willingly give up this fortress-like level of protection spoke volumes about the kind of blindingly short-sighted lengths it and its ilk would go to in pursuit of a quick buck. Doc's outfit had waited for agonising months after learning about the trucks for PharmaCorp to do something they could exploit, all the while knowing that some executive might simply overturn the policy in the endless waltz of corporate intrigue. The price hike had been the catalyst they needed. They'd campaigned relentlessly, targeting the poorest districts where the hike would be felt the keenest with laser-like precision. On a night of a scheduled delivery they'd launched the demonstration, their own agents embedded in the crowd.

At the end everything was going to come down to a calculated risk. As the A.P.Es arrived the protestors would need to get out of dodge fast. A gun battle would break out, with snipers targeting both the A.P.Es and the private security goons. The aim wasn't casualties, but coverage. If Doc's outfit only went up against the private security forces the media response would be slow to non-existent – just another attempted burglary in Downtown. But with the A.P.Es? That stuff was catnip to the news pundits. The place would be crawling with on-scene reporters in no time. With all those cameras around, there was a significant risk that someone might notice the DoD trucks. The fallout would be disastrous, not because of public outcry (because who the hell cared what the public thought anymore?) but because of the leverage it would give PharmaCorp's rivals. They'd raise an acrimonious stink about preferential treatment and corruption and PharmaCorp would sweat blood. If PharmaCorp had any sense at all getting those trucks out of the warehouse would be top priority, and they and their cargo (now already loaded – a spy camera, implanted in the loading bay by

the technician at great personal risk – had confirmed that) would be hauling ass at the first sign of real trouble. In the confusion the exit would be sloppy, rushed, and with the cops and private security tied up the trucks would be vulnerable. An ambush would be waiting for them and whatever remaining escort detail they carried. Those waiting in the command post would be handling that duty, Doc included.

There were ‘what ifs’, of course – too goddamn many. Chief amongst them was getting the protesters out before the cops closed in. Because when they arrived that was it. No warning shots. No demands to disperse. Such genteel niceties belonged to another age. They would just get out of their vehicles and start firing, arresting anyone they could lay their hands on. If they brought a R.R.O.M with them, it would be a bloodbath.

To avoid this possibility Doc’s outfit had needed to go digital. It was another risk, but Doc had threatened to cancel the mission if they didn’t. The computer geek (everyone called him that, and he wore the label with pride) was monitoring the convoy by hacking their GPS systems. As soon as they neared Main, he’d shout to the AM radio operator (no risk using more computers than necessary), who’d relay the command to retreat to the agents in the crowd. Even with this precaution it still stank. There was no getting around the fact that the protesters were being used as bait. They didn’t know what was going on; they were just vulnerable people protesting for their right not to be treated like dirt. The worst part was that if the operation paid off Doc’s outfit wouldn’t even be able to just give the drugs to those who needed them. They’d sell them with a heavy discount, but sell them just the same. The outfit wasn’t Robin Hood and his merry men. Robin Hood had never had to pay for guns and ammunition, safe houses and hackers, computers and spy cameras, and all the other thousand expenses that sucked down money like rain in a desert.

*How did it get this bad?* thought Doc sadly. *How did we get to a state of affairs where people are choking on the air, and where we’re here using them as meat shields?* Doc’s outfit was part of the American Underground, just another one of the numerous dissident organisations branded as Subversives. There were the Liberals, the Democratic Liberals, the Free Americans, the Reformers, the Revivalists, the Social Democrats, the Outlaws, Rebel America, the Greens, radicals, syndicalists, socialists, Marxists, anarchists and a thousand others. Whatever they called themselves they were all the same; just another group of angry, downtrodden people with a few guns fighting on a wing and a prayer. In his blackest moods Doc sometimes wondered what would happen if his or any other group managed to bring down the Wall and the bastards inside. The Wall was just a symbol. There *was* no single dictator or organisation they were fighting, no snake’s head that could be lopped off to kill the body – just an amorphous, ever-shifting mass of the rich and powerful. You wanted to match their strength? Sure, just become them. Switch out the actors and the play would still be the same. And even if, *if*, they somehow managed to right all society’s wrongs and put things back on course, what then? The rest of the world was still going to hell. Food was still running out. Epidemics were cutting down millions. Entire countries had become refugee camps. Everywhere that wasn’t burning was flooding, and everywhere that wasn’t overcrowded was deserted.

At times like these the only thing that made Doc keep his faith in the decency of his cause were the A.P.Es. In a way he was almost grateful to them for that. They weren’t cops. To call

them that would have been an insult to the memory of honest law enforcement. Doc had had a friend who'd been a cop once. It was in the earlier days, when the worldwide descent into madness had finally reached tipping point and become inevitable. His friend had been one of the small voices trying to make a stand against the chaos, ignored or reviled for doing so. One day he and the rest of his precinct had been told they were being replaced by a new task force. He'd died in a riot a week later, killed by one of his replacements. The A.P.Es were the distillation of force, the apex of amoral violence, brutal killers fitted with subdermal cybernetics and fed a constant diet of filtered air, combat steroids and aggression enhancers through their rebreathers. They said the technology used to 'upgrade' them had originally been stolen from research conducted in the gulags of China, and that recruits were drawn from criminal syndicates and street gangs. Doc could believe it. In a world comprised of shades of ever darkening grey, the APEs somehow managed to stand out as an evil without peer. If Doc had one sincere wish, it was that when he had to bow out, he'd get to do so clutching an A.P.E in a chokehold whilst he pulled the pin of a grenade.

Doc's wristwatch started beeping. It was time to get to the ambush site. The A.P.Es would be nearing Main Street any moment now. Men and women began pulling weapons off the gun racks.

"All right," said Doc, holstering a pistol and taking a long swig from his hip flask. "Let's move out."

*Note:*

*A.P.E – Armed Pacification Enforcer*

*R.R.O.M – Rapid Response Operations Machine*