

Live From The Volgograd Blackout!

Barth Anderson

I was sitting in the last restaurant in town, a Wendy's, waiting for my ride to Volgograd. NATO and the Kazakh Revolutionary Army had played tug of war with this city for the last week, earning me some good ratings from the folks in Europe and America. But that show was over. Now, this city, Kamyshin, was called simply Checkpoint Wombat by Major Rubbov and her troops. Sitting in this Wendy's yellow booth, I drank Turkish coffee and removed my computer from my breast pocket, spreading it on the table.

"On," I told it. "CBS."

I called up Bunson's story from the night before. Fluid and steady, a camera floated between nineteenth century warehouses. He'd been in Saratov. The German district. Row after row of Gothic arched windows lined a shell torn street. I admired the feed. Sunlight burned along fangs of broken glass hanging in the highest windows. Dust from missile-milled cobblestone powdered the buildings. Mega clarity. Bunson was repeating my stories as he followed me across the Kazakh front—I reported from Saratov last week. In the corner of the screen, Bunson's ratings stared back at me from below the CBS eye:

A numbing 71%.

You told me Bunson only copped sixty points this morning, I subvocalized to Linda, who was probably sipping a nice cold beer in the New York studio at that moment.

Subbing back to me, Linda's Brooklyn accent sounded flat and close. *I didn't think your ego could handle seventy-one.*

She was right about that. My Saratov numbers were nowhere near as good as Bunson's, and had floundered in the toilet ever since.

But that's what you get for downlinking in the middle of a show, I told myself.

Bill Bunson's fat, bald head appeared on my computer's screen. "Analysts say that if Saratov falls to Pan-Islam, then Volgograd and General Short are the next and final targets," he said, stiff as an old radio announcer. "Recent reports from behind General Short's blackout say that he has confiscated a nuclear warhead and an ICBM, which has buoyed his approval with American viewers—so the war will go on."

"The war *will* go on," I mocked in my snottiest voice.

Bunson went on to break the story that I was trying to cover, that Short's ICBM nukehead, unlike the missile barrage that had been turned midflight back on Moscow, was impervious to code warfare. If true, the question was whether or not Short would defy NATO and US high-command orders and deploy nukes on the enemy.

Great story, I subbed. *But Bunson reports it like he's an old CNN talking head.*

Linda snorted. *There can be only one Graham Gregorovich.*

I heard a jeep's squeaky brakes outside the Wendy's. Then an American shouted my last name.

"Gregorovich!"

"That's enough," I told my computer. The screen dimmed and the image faded so that the crumbling warehouses and the smug Bunson blinked and disappeared, revealing my computer's bandana-pattern beneath. I folded up the computer and slipped it back into my breast pocket. "Stinking seventy-one percent."

I shouldered my backpack and stepped out into the street, finding a skinny man in US regulars who swayed like a marionette version of John Wayne. "Are you Gregorovich? I'm Captain Don Copulate." He offered me his hand like it was a dead fish. I did the shaking. "Come on. Major Rubbov is waiting for you at the base. Hop in."

I threw my bag in the back and we swooped out of Checkpoint Foxtrot, past the assholes at the NATO roadblock that turned me away the night before.

I was in.

"We haven't seen any ground action in Volgograd," said Captain Copulate, bouncing the jeep across the median and drifting across three lanes of empty highway, heading south. "Haji has NATO pinned in Volgograd pretty good. That's why General Short issued the media blackout. He doesn't want the folks back home to get jittery and pull us out. If we go, Europe falls to Islam. That's what General Short says."

We drove and talked for about an hour before I realized that Copulate thought I was military. I asked Linda, while Copulate droned on, *Wouldn't you ask me who I was if you had to drive three hours with me?*

Me? No. Bad enough I'm in your head day and night, she subbed, calling up her Jewish grandmother's cadence.

After an excruciating two and a half-hour drive, the highway plunged into Volgograd's northern outskirts and a ring of vacant prefabbed office towers. The fast food joints were abandoned yet cheery, as though still eager to serve. Amazing how creepy suburbs felt when they're evacuated. When I looked at the approaching Volgograd skyline, I felt I was looking at a ghost town. A ghost town to be. I had a strange effect on Russia. The last three cities I had reported from had been destroyed or occupied. Moscow. Odessa. Then last week, the nightmare in Saratov.

The jeep rounded the broken wall of an exploded overpass, and Copulate pointed to a shopping mall's sign in Cyrillic lettering. *Partridge City Mall*, my Tranz program subbed to me. "That's camp," said Copulate. "Major Rubbov's location is classified. Hope you can keep a secret." He gave me a facetious grin. "You're not with CBS, right?"

"No." I scowled at him, wondering who this idiot thought I was. "I am *not* with CBS."

"Just kidding. That Bunson is in Saratov now, you know. Bastard better not try and infiltrate the blackout here."

For fear of being tracked by either Short's troops or a Mujahadeen outfit, I hadn't uplinked to Satellite Bruce since leaving Saratov. Now I was nervous. Copulate didn't recognize my name. What would he do when he found out I was not just a reporter, but *the* reporter on the Kazakh front?

Linda subbed, *Stop thinking to yourself, Graham. You subvocalize when you obsess.*

What, this guy knows Bill Bunson, but he doesn't know me? What's up with that?

Maybe if you hadn't downlinked at the first sign of black ops in Saratov, said Linda in her snotty vice-principal voice, Copulate here would be asking for your autograph.

I folded my arms with an angry shrug. *Shut up, Linda. No one's talking to you.*

Copulate steered us into the mall's drive. Three tall, mobile racks of SAM rockets towered in the parking lot and twenty armed NATO soldiers guarded the rack, sitting on the concrete lip of the Gap's loading dock. All was calm in the humid morning. As we careened across the parking lot toward them—past the Galleria, past Nikolys—the soldiers leapt to the tarmac. I could hear their rifles pulse to life over the jeep's engine.

Copulate pulled to a stop about fifty meters from the rockets. A flight of Pan-Islam sat-recon planes boomed down into the atmosphere, and the soldiers squinted hatefully at the enemy jets.

I was officially in the hottest warzone on the planet.

Two lieutenants, one studious in glasses and the other, feral, approached the jeep. "What the hell is this?" said the bespectacled lieutenant, leaning his weight on one foot and scrutinizing me.

"No one told us about a visitor," said the other, the blob of muscle on his chin quivering with anger.

Hey Linda, I subbed, uplink me to Bruce.

In her WWII radio voice, she subbed, *Linda to Graham. Over. Bad, bad idea. Copy?*

I think I'm gonna need some bargaining power here.

I could tell she was drinking caffeine, not beer. Her subvocal voice was fast and clipped. *No uplinking until you're with General Short. That was the one condition. You want to blow the whole deal, Graham?*

Captain Copulate got out of the jeep and approached the lieutenants with swagger, but his higher rank didn't impress them. They kept their hard eyes fixed on me. *Linda, Bruce me up! Hurry!*

With an annoyed sigh, Linda ignited the live, interactive uplink stringing my feed to Satellite Bruce to the New York studio and back. The activated wetwire buried in my thalamus triggered a dopamine flush, and the sensation hit me like mild cocaine. Along with that zesty high came a viewfinder template over my vision. To orient myself, I zoomed in and out at the distant Mamal Hill at the center of Volgograd, then I got a wide shot of the twenty soldiers and the nearest rack of rockets cutting diagonally behind them. In the corner of my eye, out of shot, I could see the bright green number: 20.2 million.

OK. You're live, hotshot. Nice knowing you.

The two lieutenants were unshaven lugs and they looked great with the tan, blurry shapes of other NATO soldiers moving behind them. I bumped up the reds in their faces to make them look hardier. My number of viewers buoyed to 20.7 immediately, as Net International's software rang up subscribers and informed them that their war correspondent had uplinked live.

"Never mind, Skullpopper," said Copulate. "The major sent me to get him."

I kept my eyes on the two soldiers. Skullpopper, the one in glasses, pointed to me casually. "Don't you know who this guy is, Captain?"

"Rubbov told me his name's Gregorovich," said Captain Copulate, out of view.

"Graham Gregorovich. Ring a bell?" said the lieutenant. "The zillionaire Trig Tripper paid hundreds of millions to wire this freak like a walking TV studio. Graham has been sneaking around the Kazakh front with cameras plugged into his optic nerve." He ducked his head and glared at me as if trying to see the TV cameras in my pupils.

"Are you kidding me?" said the other lieutenant. His shoulders tensed and he hefted his rifle. "You're bringing Graham Gregorovich here, Copulate? Jesus, we're in a blackout!" He set his rifle down and stalked up to the jeep, fanning his hands as if to distract me from looking at the rockets. "Shut your eyes, mutha. Don't look at the sammies! Don't look at me either! Shut your eyes!"

Copulate lunged into the shot and put his hand on the lieutenant's chest. "Hold it, Loco."

Loco shouted at me. "Did you come here to show Pan-Islam where we are right now? Huh? Is top secret data 'good copy' for you?"

No, but you're great copy, Lieutenant Loco, subbed Linda.

"We have to detain Gregorovich," said Skullpopper matter-of-factly. "Without prior notification, this checkpoint must—"

I stood up in the jeep and pulled the frame out to get the whole squad. From this vantage, it looked like a Hollywood crane shot with the whole cast looking up at me. "My free passage is guaranteed by the Russian constitution," I declared, "not to mention the US constitution and the GATT5 free trade agreement."

I got a better feel for his nickname as Loco laughed a shrill, whinnying laugh. "No, no. We can't let this geek wander around the compound, filming everything in sight."

I flinched. God, how I hated that word. "Filming?" Over eighty hours of surgery had turned me into Trig Tripper's journalistic superhero and this crazy bastard said I was *filming*? "You think you can stop me, Señor Loco? I am *uploading* this whole conversation right now."

Both lieutenants and Captain Copulate stared at me, incredulous.

A bell tinkled in my head, announcing incoming data from Bruce. Below my number of viewers, which had swelled to over 21 million, came my first ratings for this show: Sixty-seven percent.

Not bad, subbed Linda. *Looks like your viewers have forgiven you for all the dead air last week.*

A rating of sixty-seven percent (an amalgam of straight viewership, approval, chat room words per minute, favorable wetblog posts, and other stats) was a fantastic opening number. Suddenly, I felt like a wolf, like I could eat these three little pigs, Billy Bunson, and his stupid "camera crew" whole. The dopamine rush didn't hurt, either. "Tell me something." I jumped down from the jeep. "Who's the Sat in this chicken-shit outfit?"

Captain Copulate looked guilty. He said, "I'm the Satellite Officer."

"So what are your numbers, Copulate?"

He muttered and looked up at me sheepishly, "I think our unit had twenty-five percent approval last week."

"That's pathetic. What's your mission objective? Knocking down old ladies? Kicking dogs?" I said in my most condescending. "You want to detain me on *my* live show, and you got a limp twen-tee-five

percent?"

Oh you red-hot stud, said Linda, now in a breathy Marilyn Monroe. *The chats are filling. Core samples put your ceiling in the nineties. All twelve news networks are broadcasting you live. Oh, Grammy-poo, I want your baby!*

Loco, wounded, folded his arms and said to me, "Yeah? Well, what were your last numbers?"

I'll give you my numbers! I subbed my dopamine-addled largesse to Linda. *I'm Woodward and Bernstein and the six-million dollar man! I am a pulsing stream of light, baby, straight into the heart of darkness!* "Sixty-seven percent and climbing. Right now. And the sky's the limit."

"What? You can't poll when you're mobile," said Copulate. He took a step backwards. "Can you?"

"21.5 million viewers with a sixty—whoa—seventy percent rating. I can poll you, too—" I wagged my eyebrow "—if you're into that sort of thing."

"You got that kind of bandwidth," Copulate looked like he wanted to pet me, "in your *brain*?"

"I'm made of bandwidth. I could go interactive with the whole city of Los Angeles," I assured him. The dopamine bath my brain was taking had transformed me into my online personality, the reporter who had synched The Who's "Won't Get Fooled Again" while uplinking hot feeds of all those code-jacked nukeheads landing in Moscow. "But let's put our meat on the slab here. Linda? Gimme Major Rubbov's numbers. One moment, gentlemen," I said smooth and deep, keeping the frame tight around their faces. They looked like they were witnessing a demonic possession. "Oh! Look at that. You boys dipped since you last got rated. Your whole unit is at twenty-*one* percent. AI on Satellite Bruce says all units in the Vol theatre took a hit when Short's blackout was announced. Bad for democracy, blackouts. Bad for viewership. You know what that means?"

A heavy-set woman with close-cropped hair emerged from the Gap loading dock. She was wearing the stiff grey uniform of the former Russian army, a pistol at her wide hip. Behind her walked three men with rifles. I zoomed her.

Offscreen, Loco asked me, "What? What's that mean?"

With the Russian officer walking straight into my shot, I said, "It means America thinks you suck."

Major Inge Rubbov, I figured. What was left of the Russian army had been absorbed into NATO's forces after Moscow fell, but with no surrender pending, this woman wore her uniform like she was wrapped in a flag. "Mr. Gregorovich?" said the woman. "I am Major Rubbov."

Tranz told me she was speaking Russian and then translated her greeting, imitating Rubbov's flat intonation. I shook her hand. It was like gripping a beam.

Rubbov had a wetwire too. Everyone in the outfit must have been Tranzed, if they had a Russian-speaking CO. "Let's go into the Gap where we can speak privately."

Skullpopper spat. "Ain't no private conversations with *that* freak."

Rubbov waited for the translation. Then she turned to me and her cheekbones reddened. "Are you uplinked now?"

"Up close and personal," I said.

"You were told not to uplink."

Graham. . . . Linda sing-songed to me. We should snuff the link.

"If you want me here," I said to Rubbov, "you get me and several million of my closest friends."

"No, Mr. Gregorovich. That is not a trustworthy situation."

My numbers shot up into the mid-seventies with that, and back in New York, Linda sounded like she was having an orgasm.

"Yeah?" I said to Rubbov. "Well, you didn't tell Copulate who I was, Major. I don't trust you very much either." Then, as an after thought, I said, "Why don't you trust me? What, my Moscow show?"

Rubbov folded her arms over her massive chest and glared at me with unmasked hatred. That's when I realized that General Short had *ordered* her to contact me. Up to her, she would have stiffed the media, and especially Graham Gregorovich. "I watched with great interest your coverage of the Republicans in Texas."

Oops. Translation glitch. "The Republic of Texas, she meant," I corrected for the home audience. "Yes. I got a Pulitzer nomination for that. Should have won, too, but Bunson at CBS—"

"Tell me. Where did your sympathies lie in the Texas story?"

Sympathies? Sympathies? I'd never thought it before. "I don't think I have 'sympathies'."

"So," Rubbov summarized, "you did not share their desire for a fundamentalist state? A Baptist regime?"

"No, of course not."

"But they asked you if you shared that desire."

"No. They assumed I did."

"And you took advantage of that assumption in order to tell their story."

People have been debating your motives in the chats, Graham. This is really a hot interview, Linda breathed in appreciation. Totally meta.

Linda, would you shut up? You and Tranz are one too many voices in my head! I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to concentrate. To Rubbov, I said, "All I did was uplink and let Baptists talk. I told the story straight, hoping my viewers would make up their own minds. You might not trust my motives, but Colonel Travis loved me for it. Still does. A total win-win."

"And you want to do the same thing here," said Rubbov, as I bumped up the color of the burst blood vessels in her nose. "To tell a story that makes General Short look foolish now that he has a weapon that could turn the tide."

"The *blackout* is what makes Short look foolish," I sneered. "I don't have anything to prove, Major. I'm an American. I just want access to my product."

She laughed at me. "What 'product' is that?"

"Event journalism," I smiled, "live from the Volgograd blackout!"

Rubbov nodded slightly as she listened to her translation. "By all means. Let's get you to your product, then."

I sighed wetly and tried to hold back my tears of relief. I'd hit seventy-nine percent.

Oh my god. Oh my god. She's got a chlorotazer! Graham!

But I was looking at my ratings in the lower corner of my field of vision, wondering if I would see them hit eighty, and consequently, didn't see the nasty swatch of fabric in the Major's hand as she lunged forward and slapped it against my bicep.

The world tilted. Partridge City Mall looked like a crooked photograph in my eyes.

I realized I was on the ground when the major's boots appeared before my nose. "Downlinking isn't so bad for a reporter, Mr. Gregorovich. After all," Rubbov said, squatting into my line of sight, "the only reason I'm taking you to see General Short is because you chose not to show your viewers what you saw in the Saratov gymnasium."

Then the world went cloudy and I remember wondering if my show looked grey in America.

And hast thou killed the Jabberwock?

Come to my arms my beamish boy!

O frabjous day, calloo callay!

He chortled in his joy.

After she finished Lewis Carroll, she did some Robert Frost. Then a little Gwendolyn Brooks. As I slowly came back to my senses, Linda's voice was like listening to music from the bottom of a swimming pool.

Graham! You with me? Oo, man, she see-tazed you good, huh? You've been unconscious, right? Is that what happened?

I subbed, *I'm woozy. My stomach hurts.*

Hang on. I'm gonna Bruce you up. The dopamine will help clear your head.

The template appeared across my black field of vision. She was right. The effervescent dopamine from the igniting wetwire defogged me after a couple heartbeats. I opened my eyes and found myself on a neatly made bed with a bright window that hurt my eyes. Only a handful of loyal viewers were tuned in at the moment. *How long . . . ?*

Two hours. All your vittles are fine. Biotronics, too.

My whole arm is numb. I could feel the contusion where my pores had betrayed me and opened up to the electrochemical zap. A bandage was on the skin beneath my shirt, but it didn't cover the saucer-sized bruise spreading down my elbow.

Chat rooms have been debating for hours what Rubbov and Short are up to. Most think they're gonna off you. Any ideas?

Mamal Hill in central Volgograd filled the room's one window. The toppled statue of Mother Russia, once the tallest statue in the world, sprawled across the hill like pieces of a giant, disassembled

mannequin. A knee. A great arm. I watched in awe, throat clenching with emotion: My numbers were in the tank again. Second time in a week I'd downlinked, giving my subscribers nothing but a dead feed. "That conversation with Rubbov was BS," I said aloud for the benefit of my audience. "She meant to drug me before we started talking."

I suddenly realized I was starving. I hadn't had anything in my stomach since the Turkish coffee. With an ultra-tight close up so that everyone could see the Cyrillic lettering, I scanned the boxes of food in the room's little kitchenette. I selected macaroni and cheese and filled a pan with water. "Tap smells like rotten eggs," I told the folks at home. Then I set the pan on the one grill stove and turned the flame up high.

Wow. Mac and cheese. You deserve a Pulitzer for this.

Ignoring Linda, I opened the macaroni and cheese and wondered with a stab of regret how high my ratings would have sailed if I had uplinked in that Saratov gymnasium last week. But then, maybe Rubbov was right. Perhaps I wouldn't be here now, on the verge of interviewing General Short himself, if I'd disobeyed the black ops commander and covered the call to prayer in Saratov.

Graham, forty different chats have been hounding me for hours. They want me to ask you something.

What?

They want to know why you broke your promise. They want to know what you didn't show us in the Saratov gymnasium.

Now that Rubbov spilled the beans, everyone would be asking that. I poured the elbow noodles into the boiling water.

Graham?

The noodles roiled and spun in the bubbling pot and for the first time in my professional career, I wondered if I did have sympathies, which confused me. I'm not cold or calculating, no matter what *The London Times* says about me. I downlinked in Saratov to protect my viewers from the horror of that goddamn gymnasium.

The door opened behind me. I turned and pulled the shot out wide to get two men in British RAF uniforms entering my little room. Both had pistols drawn.

I glanced at their guns. "Boys, boys, there's enough macaroni for everyone."

The taller of the two, a blond major with a feathery little moustache, said, "Kill your link, there's a good fellow."

"I can't." I turned away. "I'm in the middle of a cooking show."

The Brit enunciated a congenial little chuckle. "See-tazing you would merely delay you're interview with General Short—again."

I'll Bruce you up as soon as you say the word, subbed Linda, shutting down my uplink. Happy dopamine dribbled away, and suddenly the idea of macaroni and cheese in a Russian warzone depressed the hell out of me. I turned off the flame.

"Clear," said the other officer, touching a finger to his right ear. "No ka-band transmissions. He's down."

Your numbers are holding for the moment, subbed Linda. Everyone knows you're coming back! Hang in there, Graham!

The blond Brit looked at the box on the stove as he closed the door behind us. "Macaroni and cheese? You'll claim we tortured you."

I followed the Brits, giving Linda the blow by blow so that she could report to subscribers as I made my way down a long hallway of crappy carpeting. The Brits guided me into a cramped elevator, smelling of cigarettes and motor oil. The major pushed a button marked, according to my Tranz program, Lower Level.

When the doors opened, a wall of a torso appeared in front of me, with a deep blue American uniform. Its epaulets bore a general's star on shoulders so wide I winced. I kept looking up. The man was well over sixty, I guessed, but he stared down at me with impervious eyes and a mastiff's face. His jaw looked like it could have fit my whole head in his mouth. "Gregorovich?" he muttered. "I'm Short." He shook my little hand, rolling my knuckles painfully like marbles. "Let's get this interview started. Come on."

Heh, smirked Linda. Now I know why they call him Short.

I wasn't feeling so glib, standing in the presence of the man who was charged with holding off the enemy's advance into Russia. The general took me to a glass walled cubicle that had once been a laundry room by the smell. Now it was the heart of the heart, the General's command center in the Volgograd Theater of the Russian War. He offered me a seat at a folding table. As I sat, I noticed an old fashioned video camera.

Holy burrito, subbed Linda. She sounded scared.

What, Linda? I froze, leaning forward, hands on the armrests, elbows jutting up behind me as I sort of half sat in the chair.

You're on TV, Graham! You're on the Pentagon Channel right now! Live! You look like you're taking a crap!

I sat back in the chair and shot nervous glances at Short and the camera. "General? What is this?"

"I promised you an interview. Well, here we go." Short sat across from me, then turned and smiled into the camera, "I'm here live with noted journalist Graham Gregorovich. Graham?" He smiled his straight predatory teeth at me. "Damn glad you could make your way to Volgograd."

Gotta get on top of this, I told myself. But I didn't know how to do it without uplinking. I wanted my viewers. I wanted my fizzy dopamine high. I wanted my bratty online personality.

Linda seemed to read my mind, or maybe I was subbing again. *Graham, baby, sugar, Short's a big nothing. Look at this guy! Monotony Central! Someone shaved an ape and taught it to speak!*

"Let's start with the question that everyone has been asking, even in Net International's own chat rooms," said the General in his kind, patrician timbre. He looked at me, and his eyes went haywire. He was a crazed linebacker and I the lead-footed quarterback. "In a war that has rickety approval back home, Mr. Gregorovich, you're here showing the worst side of things. The recoded nukes turned back on Moscow. The retreat of the Turkish Navy. Now you've come to Volgograd, presumably to get the better of me. Well. What do you want Americans to see here, Graham?"

Oh this bastard, subbed Linda. His numbers are escalating. He's gonna rally support for himself by wiping his feet on you. Graham? Graham? You still look like you're taking a crap! Get a grip!

My brain felt skull-bound without my live feed. I couldn't speak. I couldn't even sub. Was there a way to uplink? Could I somehow piggyback on a signal coming from this room? If my brain had legs, it would have chewed one off by now.

"I mean really, Graham," said General Short, crazy eyes glinting in that cinder-block head, "showing the destruction of Moscow and accompanying it with seventy year old rock and roll music? That's worse than mockery. That's just depressing and juvenile. Who do you think that benefits in the end? Other than your own petty aspirations, I mean."

I managed in a squeaky voice, "I'm flattered, General. You've been keeping track of my career."

"Who hasn't?" he said. The words rolled out of his mouth way too easily. He'd been waiting to say these words for days. Maybe weeks. He'd been eagerly anticipating my arrival to say all these words to me in front of his subscribers. "Everyone's watching your shows—which debase the war into something childish—and no one is paying attention to the truth."

The truth my ass, subbed Linda. He means no one is watching him on the Pentagon Channel!

"The truth my ass," I said woodenly, trying to reconstruct how Linda put it, "no one is watching your version of the truth on the Pentagon Channel."

The General paused long enough for me to see that he was jealous of me, that he bitterly sought the ratings I enjoyed. *Linda, what are his numbers?*

He's sucking viewers away from us by the millions. He's 55% and climbing right now. Is there anyway you can look less constipated, Graham?

"I think you got me all wrong. Let me ask you something, General," I said, trying to sound casual, but probably looking like an inmate. "Is it true that you copped a couple ICBMs, as William Bunson at CBS reported this morning?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I told Bill that myself."

I was surprised at how readily he admitted it. "You gonna use them?"

"Haji should know what he's up against." Short gave a curt nod, looking over his shoulder into the Pentagon Channel's feed. "Oh, I'll use them if I have to."

I rubbed my hands together. It was all coming back to me now. This was the reason I bought low-orbit tickets to Moscow in the first place. "Where, General?"

"What? Where?" He laughed a good-natured laugh, like he liked my show of spunk. "You can't ask me 'where.'"

"On the Uzbekis? Iran? The Mujahadeen in Siberia? You gonna nuke the Moodge? Come on," I said, nodding to the camera, "whether it's through me or the Pentagon, America wants to know what you have planned for Haji. *Tell us.*"

The General's face was set like brickwork, but I could see that he wasn't sure how to take this. He thought he had me cornered at first, but this was strange territory now. On one hand, it helped his cause if the enemy knew what he had in his arsenal. But now he was wondering what my angle was. He glanced at his camera.

"You're not afraid of code warfare, then, I take it?" I asked, folding my arms.

He was still scrutinizing me, looking me over like I was a chameleon that had just changed colors. "No, Paki code warriors don't scare me."

"Why not?"

The General leaned his loaf-like forearms on the wobbly card table. He was getting comfortable with me. At last. "Let's just say, we've learned from Moscow's mistakes."

I grinned, and I got a little smile out of him. "You got me all wrong. What? You think I'm a protester or something?"

He *wanted* to trust me. And why not? My core numbers told him that I could deliver the whole country to his side if I wanted. The general laughed. Honest to God, he laughed with me. The eyes stopped going haywire. "For the record," he said, " *are* you a peacenik, Mr. Gregorovich?"

"If I were a peacenik," I said, finally starting to relax, "I'd be in Washington DC, not the Volgograd blackout. Now. For the folks back home and the Haji in Punjab. Tell us why you aren't afraid of your ICBMs being recoded once you launch it."

"I suppose it doesn't matter who knows it," said Short, rubbing his meaty face with a meaty hand. "We disabled the ICBMs' targeting and navigation gear. It's an old fashioned V2, Graham. It goes up. It comes down. Nothing for Punjab to monkey with."

We both laughed. "And you know where you want to drop it already?"

He gave a sage nod.

"Now here's my one and only concern, General." I took a deep breath. I thought about the black ops officer who told me that he'd take me on his Saratov mission if I downlinked. I'd never been so honest in my life. "Will the folks at home get to see it happen?"

The General's eyes went haywire again. I'd asked him one two many questions. He aimed his remote loosely at the camera and the uplink light went off and beeped on stand by.

You're blacked out, stud.

"What, General?" I demanded. "Why did you downlink?"

Both your numbers and the Pentagon's are flushing hard! subbed Linda. *Mayday! Everyone's nodding on "This Week with Bill Bunson"! Mayday!*

"Damn you to hell, General!" I shouted.

Short took off his jacket like he was getting ready to box. "You want to make me look barbaric. In front of my own audience," he shouted, folding his jacket over the back of his chair. "Just like you did to those Baptists in Texas. Well, I can't afford that, young man." He shook his head and his jowls jiggled. "I never should have broken my own blackout. This feed is over. We'll keep you in the brig till doomsday." He checked his watch. "Which is coming up after a word from our sponsors."

"General, I am *on* your side! What little support you've got right now, General, is because of *me*," I shouted. "Blocking out the press was the wrong strategy."

"Don't lecture me. You blacked out your viewers too," said the General, rolling up his sleeves. "In Saratov. The NATO officers in black. I saw you snuff your link and I know special-forces took you to a

prayer meeting that night."

A prayer meeting? subbed Linda. *Is that where you were when you downlinked?* She wanted to say more, but she could hear me subbing, obsessing over everything I blocked from my viewers that night. The NATO officers in black carrying old AK-5's so that the sound of their guns wouldn't be identified with NATO. The holy imam shouting for mercy in Russian. The deafening sound of gunfire bouncing in that gymnasium. "Yes, I downlinked," I admitted. "I made the same mistake as you, General. I decided for my viewers what they could and couldn't handle."

Short bowed his head over his crossed arms, thinking or ignoring me, I couldn't tell.

While I remembered the line of empty pairs of shoes against one wall of that gymnasium, I could hear the General's camera beeping quietly on stand by. For fear of the muezzin crying coded messages during the call to prayer, that NATO black ops team slaughtered the room full of Saratov's clerics. As soon as I realized what they intended to do, I had decided to spare my audience the horror of it.

I downlinked. I censored myself. And now those horrific images of bursting flowers of blood were all alone in my head.

It was the single greatest mistake of my life. "We *want* to see," I told him in a quiet voice, "we have to see." I glanced aside, blinking at the Pentagon Channel's camera. "We deserve it."

General Short looked at me with a new appraisal, his jaw working, chewing his thoughts as if they were hard candy.

"Show America what happens," I said to the General.

He said "How? How would I do it?"

The buzz of the moment was stronger than uplinking as I realized I had moved the general. "Show it from the ICBM's point of view."

He grimaced at me, and for a moment I wondered if I was the brute he wanted to exterminate. But then Short straightened to his full height and nodded one curt nod. "I will. But I'll show the launch on the Pentagon Channel."

"With all due respect, General," I said, "you should let me cover it. The Pentagon's number's stink because you use video, General. Looks like Gulf War coverage through that thing," I said, nodding at his beeping video camera. "But I'm state of the art."

He looked at me much like Lt. Skullpopper had, peering at me as if looking for cameras in my eyes. "What were your ratings this morning?"

"My core numbers were huge. My ceiling is in the nineties," I said and tapped my temple. "General, with my brains and your brawn . . ."

He laughed and clapped me on the shoulder with a crushing hand.

Linda said in her breathy Marilyn Monroe, *Oh happy day. Who says the press and the military can't work together?*

We set up in the mission control just outside the war room, where we could see the ICBM launch pad. Bruce handled the details in orbit, once the General's right hand man, Colonel Combada, gave me the access codes to the ICBM.

I sat across a formica table from the General and Colonel Combada. Combada, a handsome young man with a sober brow, sat with his head bowed prayerfully, listening to us. Short faced me, leaning on the table. Behind them were the wide launch panel and the broken body of Mother Russia, visible through a wide window. I signaled the General when I felt the dopamine rush telling me the uplink had been established. I was so excited I thought I was going to wet my pants.

"We are engaged in a great struggle here, far from American shores. But as I look out at the ruin of this once proud city, a city the Czar fought for, a city the Nazis and Soviets warred over, I feel a sense of tattered pride. We brought something special and wondrous to Russia in the last century." I zoomed the General on cue. "The freedom to make laughably simple decisions. Our smallest choices say the most about us. Being able to choose between Pepsi and Coca-Cola, for example. McDonald's or Burger King. To Russia for a brief time, we brought these simple choices, offering them instead of the harder decisions of life or death—and we hope these simple choices may return one day in a better spring.

"I know I sound ridiculous to some. But Graham Gregorovich, here, reminded me of my American duty, so all who are watching, you have a right to see with your own eyes what we do here in your name. To defend your choices."

The General turned and looked at Combada. They shook hands and then they began tapping sequences into their key pads.

Linda switched the feed from my optic nerve to the rocket's nose camera. Once I was clear, I snapped my computer from my breast pocket as though preparing a bib for lobster. "On. Net International," I told it.

From the corner of my eye, I could see the two men turn their keys in unison. The image on my computer screen was black at first. Then light divided the darkness. The mouth of the silo opened to reveal a pale blue sky. I resisted the urge to tweak the color so that the blue was stronger, but I let the rocket's eye show America exactly what it saw. The missile lifted and, for a moment, from the fish-eye lens, Volgograd with its cratered highways and collapsed houses could be seen surrounding the silo. But as the missile rose, it stared into the blue above, and the city dropped out of sight.

The rocket drove upward into the azure, and my ratings were carried with it, far above anything Bill Bunson had ever dreamed of. Eighty-nine. Ninety. I'd never scaled so high before. The rocket's vision washed into the white-blue of the atmosphere, and my ratings jumped higher.

Ninety-eight. Ninety-nine.

That's it! One hundred percent viewership and total approval! Linda cried in my head. *That's as good as it gets!*

As the rocket reached the zenith of its arc, it turned away from the clean, white view of the outer atmosphere and looked back at the land. A brown horizon shouldered its way onto my computer screen, and the vast terrain of earth focused, becoming recognizable as the rocket descended. The swollen Elburz mountains of Iran and the over-polluted Caspian Sea. Then the amber deserts and ruddy steppes of the enemy's homeland.

Wait. What's happening to the ratings? subbed Linda.

As I watched my numbers, a new thought seemed to dawn on my viewers, distracting them.

Ninety-nine. Ninety. Eighty-one.

A single city bloomed in the center of the rocket's view. I could see highways. Industrial parks. Suburbs.

Seventy-six. Fifty-one.

As that foreign, long-hated capital became familiar to them, from all the war maps we the media had hammered into their heads over the last few months, my viewers chose to turn away, unable to watch what would happen next, or unwilling, perhaps, to approve.

They simply turned away and blacked me out.