|---| Prologue |---|

Orderly Conduct

by The Wildcat

Long shadows stretched down the city streets and up the sides of melancholy buildings. The late afternoon sun hung over the western desert town. The hot, dry wind stilled for the first time in weeks.

Scarcely a dozen people meandered about on Webber Avenue, and they would soon be inside the nearest structures. The air raid sirens had assured compliance of the denizens, but repeated drills had dulled their reactions.

A police cruiser rolled to a stop in the intersection with West 7th Street. The officers sat quietly for a few minutes and allowed the whipping red and blue lights to signify their authority.

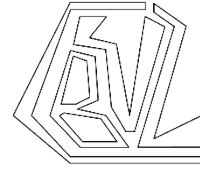
One of the officers finally rasped a question of his partner. "Okay Cap, what is this? Another drill?"

Before *Cap* could answer, the sounds of rotors shook the air. The marine aircrafts' shadows flashed over the squad car and continued on their eastward flight path.

Cap shot a knowing glance at his partner and then pressed the send button on his radio. "Alright people listen up, this is Captain Heath. This is NOT a drill. I have been informed that the factory is closed... repeat, the factory IS closed.

"We now report to Agent Oldham and his people. A communications black out is in place for all civilian and low rank personnel. We're way beyond formal police codes and orderly evacuation. No one leaves the city.

“You know the routine frontward and backwards. Always face east, away from the base. Always wear your safety glasses. Keep the streets clear.”



With that, the captain and his partner emerged from their vehicle. The men drew their side arms and double-checked the moving parts. By that time, only a fraction of the city's inhabitants remained outside. Clearing the streets would be an easy matter for the local police force.

Three blocks to the south, the doors of a second patrol car opened. To the north, a third duo vacated their cruiser. Soon, the entire city would be surrounded by armed law enforcement.

“Let's do it,” the captain muttered.

He then fired a single blast into the asphalt. He knew that the bullet could ricochet, but he followed his orders dutifully. Multiple reports drifted on the air as the process was repeated throughout the city.

Heath raised a bullhorn to his lips and spoke. *“Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a drill. Report to the nearest building and wait for further instructions. Anyone caught on the street can and will be shot.”* Heath tossed the bullhorn into the car and closed the door.

The captain and his partner began to stroll down the avenue with their handguns at the ready. The remaining pedestrians scattered for the nearest structure. No one actually expected the police to encounter serious resistance, but the officers remained tense for the sheer gravity of the situation.

The few vehicles permitted within the city limits stood abandoned. Each storefront was empty. Every window was faceless.

Captain Heath took note of one peculiar storefront window. Inside sat a row of televisions, each displaying the same announcement. The emergency broadcast instructed all observers to seek shelter.

Heath snickered. Even the bums of the city knew to go into the nearest building when the air raid sounded. It was always the adventurous or a few rebellious teenagers that dared tempt fate during the drills. Or an outsider that stumbled into the city on the wrong day.

The rhythmic thumping of chopper blades drew all attention to the sky. A pair of transports accompanied by their fighter escorts passed above the rooftops. Their easterly course carried them past the city quickly.

No markings. The aircraft were pitch black and plain.

“Rob... those aren’t ours.” Heath glimpsed his partner’s startled face and then spoke into his radio. “Let’s... hurry this up.”

Aside from the local police, the streets had been abandoned. Occasional chatter crackled from the captain’s radio.

A group of teens. A bum hidden in a dumpster. They were the typical stragglers during any air raid drill. Nothing out of the ordinary.

“HEY!” Rob barked into an alley. “PUT YOUR HANDS ON YOUR HEAD AND STEP INTO THE OPEN!”

Captain Heath rushed to his partner’s side. He leveled his Glock at the young man that cowered beside the dumpster.

“Okay! I’m coming out,” the man cried. “Just... don’t shoot.”

The man raised his hands and revealed a digital camcorder. Slowly he crept out of the shadows. A look of fear had been plastered on his face.

“What did you think you were doing?” Heath demanded.

“You can’t cover it up forever,” the man said defiantly. “I know the truth and you have no right.”

“What are you? Drunk? Stoned?”

The strange man began to scream wildly. The brightness filled Captain Heath’s vision. He closed his eyes and held his protective glasses as though he feared they might fall off.

After a few moments, Heath opened his eyes and stared down at the stranger writhing on the ground with his hands over his eyes.

As Rob leaned down to tend to the shrieking man, the captain turned to face the western sky. Barely visible above the horizon, Captain Heath could see the billowing top of the distinctive mushroom cloud.

A few moments later, the ground began to rumble. The horrific sound of the explosion was muffled only slightly by the distance. The very streetlights and buildings quivered at the sound.

“A-alright, p-p-p-prepare,” Rob stammered into his radio, “...let’s p-p-p-prepare for r-refugees.” The man looked at the enthralled captain. “Cap? T-there w-will be survivors... w-won’t there?”

Captain Heath remained silent and awestruck. He had no answers for his comrade. The city was safely out of range of the blast and most of its radiation, but that was the limit to its safety.

The sight before him was indescribable. His own emotions could not be vocalized. It was at that moment that Captain Heath knew his life, his whole world, would never be the same.

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