

New Fiction from Steven Kiernan: “All Your Base Are Belong to Us”



“Exposition La Commune de Paris à l’Hôtel de Ville de Paris,” 1871. Photographer unknown.

For the amputees of Walter Reed Army Hospital, Segways were the new fad. It had become common to see roving gangs of them, upright and speeding across campus and through the hospital, riding in elevators and waiting in line at the cafeteria or pharmacy, causing a flurry of complaints from doctors and staff. And when Doc Rodriguez looked up from his physical therapy mat and saw Anthony cruising down the hall on one, a public affairs officer plastered against the wall as he sped by, Rodriguez couldn’t help but smile.



Rodriguez had been feeling sluggish, unmotivated. Kristen, his therapist, had tried getting him to do some core work with a medicine ball, but he stopped as soon as her attention moved on to another patient. He was about to leave when, through the glass windows that made up the room’s far wall, he saw Anthony. Anthony had gotten his Segway a few weeks prior from an organization that was donating them to wounded vets, and he hadn’t gone anywhere without it since. Rodriguez had tried riding one, but it bucked him off like a horse when he awkwardly attempted to step up with his prosthetics, and that was enough for him. Anthony parked the Segway against a wall and then joined Rodriguez on the stretching mat.

“What’s up, Rod?” Anthony asked.

Rodriguez shrugged.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. Hey, we gotta hit up some Halo later. Gotta practice for the tourney next week. Can't let Jeff and those army assholes beat us again."

"For sure. Talk to Juan and the guys lately?"

"Nah, haven't seen them online for like a week. Wonder what they're up to?"

"Getting ready for another deployment, probably."

Anthony paused.

"Miss those guys."

They were silent for a while; Rodriguez picking at an ingrown hair on the stump of his left leg, Anthony brushing dandruff off his shoulder. There was a commotion in the hallway and Rodriguez looked up to see some officer striding towards the entrance with a gaggle of aides scurrying around him, one of whom broke off ahead and opened the door shouting, "Officer on deck!" to everyone in the PT room. When the officer, a colonel, entered he waved his hands saying, "At ease, at ease," despite no one having gotten up to begin with.

"Must be the new base commander," Anthony whispered. "Looks like an asshole."

"That's just how officers look," Rodriguez said.

The colonel was now walking towards the center of the room, "Don't mind me, gents. I'm Colonel Darby, new Commanding Officer of Walter Reed. I'm here to introduce myself and get the lay of the land, to see how the sausage is made, if you will."

His aides, a group of lieutenants and captains, stood behind him, their hands on their hips.

“Definitely an asshole,” Anthony said.

The room then shifted back to its normal atmosphere. Patients returned to their workouts and conversations, therapists moved from mat to mat, treadmill to treadmill. Colonel Darby stalked around the room, asking questions about exercise machines and what unit people had served with, which they grudgingly put up with. His jovial attitude wore off slightly with each conversation. When he moved on, a captain appeared and handed the patients a heavy challenge coin with the Colonel’s name on it. Eventually, he made his way to Rodriguez and Anthony.

“So, what are your names?” Darby asked, arms crossed tightly.

Time for another life story, Rodriguez thought. They had all been through these conversations before with every fucking VIP that came by. He was about to speak, but Anthony beat him to it.

“I’m Anthony and this here is Rod,” Anthony cracked his knuckles, causing Darby to flinch. “We got blown up together, which is pretty cool. I think. We were both—”

“Do you have a rank?”

Rodriguez and Anthony exchanged glances. “Well, I’m a lance corporal.”

“And you?” Darby nodded.

“HM2 Rodriguez.”

“HM2? I’m not familiar with Navy ranks.”

“It means I’m a petty officer, an E-5.”

“Sir,” Darby said.

“Hm?”

"You will address me as Sir, HM2 Rodriguez," Darby said, drawing out the syllables in Rodriguez's name and rank and jabbing his finger into Rodriguez's shoulder.

The room was quiet again and he could feel a dozen pairs of eyes on him.

"I'm an E-5," Rodriguez repeated. He lowered his eyes to the floor, deflating his previous confidence, before adding, "Sir."

Darby smiled and leaned back.

"E-5. An NCO. Tell me, *petty* officer, how is it everyone here is so undisciplined? Going by first names, not respecting rank. Have you forgotten you're all still soldiers? Why are you not ordering them to wear authorized PT gear? Why do half the soldiers in here not have proper haircuts? I didn't want to believe the reports of poor morale around here, but now I completely understand." He was no longer speaking to Rodriguez but addressing the whole room. "There are going to be some changes around here. It's time you all started looking and acting like soldiers again instead of a bunch of moping civilians. You've lost your pride."

"Actually, some of us are Marines, sir," Anthony said.

Darby glared at him and then stormed out of the room, followed by his aides.

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Every now and again, despite not having feet, Doc Rodriguez took the bus up Georgia Avenue to the Wheaton Mall and bought a pair of shoes. These were the only trips he took outside of Walter Reed since arriving from Iraq eight months ago, and so he liked to make the most of them. Months in a wheelchair had taught him how people tip-toed around him, afraid to make the slightest insult. It amused him to watch them squirm.

Col. Darby had been in command for over a week now and the hospital was beginning to feel even more suffocating than usual. Every wounded warrior (a term Darby had grown fond of repeating) living in the barracks now had to attend 0700 accountability formations. Authorized PT gear was made the uniform of the day, no longer could they wear what they wanted or what was most comfortable. Wounded warriors had to check-in and out with the SNCOIC every time they went to an appointment, which was often multiple times per day. There was even talk of a curfew being put into effect. Rodriguez needed some kind of escape. So he went to the mall.

When he reached the shoe store, Rodriguez rolled straight to the athletic section. Two salesmen behind the counter exchanged looks of confusion with each other before pretending to be busy on the computer. No doubt hoping he would leave, Rodriguez thought. After a few minutes picking up shoes, checking the flexibility of the toes, comparing their weight, the younger of the sales reps, a lanky teen who hadn't yet filled out his overgrown frame, cautiously approached.

"Looking for a gift for someone?"

"Nope," Rodriguez inspected the tread of a running shoe.

"Well, that's a great runner right there," the rep said, rubbing his hands together and looking back at his comrade, who was still feigning interest in the computer screen.

"It's got great tread for cross-country and is very light weight. And the sides here allow your feet—" he paused, a hint of panic in his eyes. Rodriguez said nothing and waited for him to continue— "um, they allow your feet to breathe."

Rodriguez raised an eyebrow, wondering how long the kid could last before bursting into a frantic apology. But he'd had his fun, and instead asked if they had them in size ten; a good, solid size, he thought.

The sales rep made a quick glance towards Rodriguez's nonexistent feet. "Let me go check." He disappeared into the back of the store, the other rep following close behind.

Rodriguez knew he was being an asshole. It made him feel good, normal, like he still had some control over his life. If that meant some ableds had to feel uncomfortable for a minute or two, then so be it, they could walk it off.

The lanky rep came back out, alone this time, and Rodriguez met him at the cash register. The rep removed the security tag and boxed up the shoes, asking Rodriguez how he would like to pay. He was relaxed now that he was making a sale. Rodriguez was about to respond when he was grasped around the neck. Whoever it was squeezed tightly. Rodriguez could feel their body pressing against his back and shoulders.

"Excuse me," Rodriguez said.

The arms gently released and he turned to see an old woman. She was somewhere in her sixties, seventies maybe, judging by her gray, dry hair and purple fanny pack. He could see tears welling up in her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry I just couldn't help myself. I saw you and just had to come over and hug that poor soldier. I just can't imagine what you've been through."

"Sailor."

"What was that?"

"I'm a sailor," he said, pointing to his shirt which read "NAVY" in big block letters across his chest. "A Navy Corpsman."

"Oh, I apologize, I just assumed. What's a corpsman?"

Rodriguez sighed. Nobody ever knows what the fuck a corpsman is.

“A medic for Marines.”

“That sounds wonderful, sweetie. A real hero! Please, let me buy these shoes for you.”

She had already pulled out her card from the fanny pack and was handing it over the counter before Rodriguez knew what was happening.

“No, ma’am, it’s really all right. I can—”

“Oh no, don’t you worry. It’s the least I could do to thank you for your service. You boys really have done so much for this country.”

“Thanks, but—”

She pulled him in for another hug, nearly yanking him out of his chair. When she was done, she kissed the top of his head, signed her receipt and left. What the fuck? The sales kid was stifling a laugh.

He sat at the bus stop, waiting to return to the hospital and hoping no one else would talk to him. Other than a few confused glances at his shoebox and the empty space where his legs used to be, no one bothered him. He wanted to shrink into his chair and disappear. When the bus arrived, he waited for everyone to board before moving to the door and asking the driver to lower the lift in the back.

“Didn’t notice you there,” the bus driver said. He was a big man and had to rock himself forward a few times to build enough momentum to get out of his chair, but once he was up the bus driver was surprisingly quick. “My apologies, folks. Gotta help get this young man get loaded up.”

He met Rodriguez at the back of the bus. “This’ll take no time,” he said, reaching for the lift controls, as if Rodriguez hadn’t done this a hundred times before, and didn’t in fact know that the lift was slow as hell. Rodriguez could

see the other passengers watching through the windows, visibly annoyed that their ride was being delayed. When the lift was finally lowered, he reached for his wheels, but the bus driver beat him to it, grabbing onto his chair and pushing and guiding him onto the ramp.

“Hey,” Rodriguez said, “I got it.”

“I just want to make sure you get on nice and straight. See?”

“Fine, whatever.” He just wanted to get on board.

“Make sure you lock your wheels, I’d be all shook up if you rolled off backwards once this thing is up in the air.”

“I’m good. I’m holding on to the rails.”

The bus driver ignored him and locked the wheels himself.

Rodriguez wanted to scream at the man but didn’t want to make this already ridiculous scene any bigger, and so he bit his lower lip instead. The other passengers were huffing and sighing, checking their watches and phones with annoyance. It was embarrassing to be such an inconvenience. When Rodriguez was finally aboard, the bus driver pulled out some hooks and straps, and used them to anchor the chair to the floor. Rodriguez again tried to protest, he hated the idea of being locked in place, unable to move until someone came and untied him, but the bus driver, all smiles and stupid jokes, ignored him again.

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Back in his room, Rodriguez tossed the shoebox on top of the dresser and transferred from his chair to the bed, shoving a pile of clothes out of the way. He was tired, mentally drained. No, it went deeper than that, he thought. Spiritually drained, that was a better word for it, but not in the religious sense. Mentally, he could take anything, had taken everything, but this place was wearing him down in other ways.

And now Darby. Rodriguez was still pissed about their first encounter. *Address me as Sir*, he thought. *Act like soldiers*. Where the fuck did he think he was? Like we don't have more important shit to worry about than getting a fucking haircut every week. And that dumb grin. He should have just stuck to his guns.

He couldn't dwell on it, he thought. Negative emotions will just demoralize the patient, making their survival less certain. Always direct their attention elsewhere. He began to run through the procedure for bandaging a sucking chest wound: stop the bleeding, seal the wound with plastic, you don't want any air entering the chest cavity, place a bandage on top of the plastic and tie it around the chest for good pressure, roll the victim onto their injured side while awaiting evacuation, monitor for shock. When he was done with that, Rodriguez moved on to treating immersion foot, pitted keratolysis, where to place a tourniquet and for how long.

After several minutes his phone chirped with a text message: *get online bitch*. It was Juan, one of his old squad mates still down at Camp Lejeune. Rodriguez reached over to the nightstand for an Xbox controller and microphone and logged on.

"Hey, Doc, how's it goin, dude?"

"Same old shit, man," Rodriguez said, "It's good to hear from ya."

"Fuck yeah, man. Ain't nothin new here, just playing some Call of Duty while the boots do working parties."

"Ha ha, just like the old days."

Rodriguez wished he could be back there, dealing with all the bullshit, but these game sessions went a long way to make him still feel connected, still part of a unit. When he first arrived at Walter Reed, the doctors and therapists kept going

on and on about his “new normal” and how once he got adjusted he wouldn’t feel different at all. A life of adventure awaited; wheelchair basketball, handcycling across the country, sit-skiing down Breckenridge, fucking hiking up Kilimanjaro, and all that other inspirational horseshit everyone expected them to be doing. *New normal*, he scoffed. Fuck all that. He just wanted to feel normal normal.

“Aint the same without you, Doc. These new corpsmen we got are boot as fuck. Could use you down here training ‘em up.” There was a commotion on the other end and Rodriguez had to pull the headphones off when the sound started banging around and scraping in his ear.

“Yo, Doc, you legless asshole.” It was his old roommate, Benjamin, clearly drunk.

Rodriguez laughed. “Benji, what’s up, brother?”

“Corporal Benji to you, you fucking squid.”

They continued like that for a couple hours, shit talking back and forth, Rodriguez asking what training they were up to, if they got their next deployment orders yet. Afghanistan, Juan said, though he didn’t know where exactly. They were heading out next week for mountain warfare training in California, they’d be gone for a few weeks. Even though he had hated combat, hated how afraid it made him, hated bandaging up his friends, had felt relief when he woke up in Germany with no legs, knowing he’d never have to do it again, Rodriguez had a sudden, deep longing to go with them, and when he logged off and turned out the light, he fell asleep fantasizing about not having been blown up, about getting drunk in the barracks, about training in California, about the mountains of Afghanistan.

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The next day, after physical therapy, Anthony came over to

Rodriguez's room to play some Halo. It was a usual routine for them after PT and helped them relax after working out for two or three hours. Though Rodriguez would never admit it out loud, playing video games made him feel like his old self, back when he didn't need any kind of handicap or special equipment to play sports or any other activity. They were the one thing that made him feel like he was still equal and whole.

There was a knock at the door and Anthony got up to open it. It was Jeff, their Halo tourney rival. He pushed past Anthony and walked in.

"Yo, you trying to steal our strats or what?" Anthony said.

"Like I need to. You noobs can practice all you want but you'll never beat me and the LAN Warriors."

Rodriguez rolled his eyes. "You idiots still using that dumbass name?"

Jeff waved him off, "I'm not here to talk about that. Colonel Darby is doing room inspections. Just finished with the second floor."

"What, here?" Anthony said. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah I'm fucking serious. Asshole just burst into my room and chewed my ass out for leaving one of my arms on the bed and clothes on the floor."

The three of them surveyed the room. The "barracks" they lived in was actually a former hotel, converted for use as overflow patient housing when amputees began coming home in unexpectedly large numbers, and like most hotels was not an ideal long-term living solution. Every inch of floor space not necessary for wheelchair traffic was covered in luggage bags and spare limbs, a collection of t-shirts and knitted blankets lay in the corner, growing with every new tour of American

Legion and VFW groups to come through. Clothes were haphazardly piled on the guest bed and the small garbage can was overflowing with empty Red Bull cans and soda bottles. The bed sheets were open and scrunched to the side. A collection of magazines, pizza boxes, and orange pill bottles lay across the desk.

"Well, it smells all right," Anthony said.

The door swung open and in walked Col. Darby, who gave the room a quick once over and then stood in front of the TV.

"HM2 Rodriguez, why am I not surprised?"

"You tell m—"

"I'll tell you why, HM2 Rodriguez. I'm not surprised by the state of this," Darby scanned the space again, "*room* because every gosh darn room so far has looked exactly the same. Clothes every which way. Pizza boxes, spit bottles, pop cans," he hesitated, "pornography."

"And I'll tell you something else, HM2..."

Rodriguez could have sat there silently and taken the ass-chewing like he did earlier. Just stare and say a couple of "Yessirs," maybe squeeze in an "Aye Aye, sir" just to throw Darby off a bit, a slight stick of the needle so he could feel smug about it later. Then toss him some platitude like "I'll get right on it, sir" with no intention of actually following through, but offering just enough to make Darby feel like he had accomplished something so he could leave.

And that's exactly what Rodriguez did, Anthony and Jeff following his lead. But when Darby finally reached the end of his self-indulgent tirade he said something that caught Rodriguez off guard.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said, HM2, that I'm tired of seeing all of these Nintendos. I don't believe in coincidences and I believe there is a direct correlation to the lack of discipline around here and those darn machines."

Nintendos? he thought. "Do you mean video games, sir?"

"Don't correct me, HM2. Give me anymore attitude and I'll be speaking with...whoever it is in charge of you."

"Aren't you in charge of me, sir?" Rodriguez allowed himself a slight grin.

"You find this amusing, do you? Well, I think I've seen enough here. It's obvious what the problem is. Captain!" An aide appeared at Darby's side as if she had been there the whole time. "I want you to call IT and instruct them to shut off network access for all...video games." She nodded and pulled out a Blackberry.

"You can't do that," Anthony nearly shouted.

Darby regarded him, "It's my base, son."

"You can't mess with our personal time like that," Rodriguez countered. "We're," he searched for the right word, something Darby would understand, "off-duty!"

"You're never off-duty when you live on base."

"But, we're fucking hospital patients!"

"And that's exactly my point. You all need to get back in the right mindset. You're not hospital patients, you're soldiers! And soldiers don't play video games, they train. You should be working on PMEs for promotion boards or taking online college courses. There are plenty of more productive activities you could be doing. Believe me, I'm doing you a favor."

"But, sir," Rodriguez pleaded, all the resistance in him from

a moment before had drained out, "I know it's hard to understand, but this is important for us. All of us. It's how I keep in touch with the guys in my unit." He hoped that would be enough, that Darby could at least sympathize with that.

"You have a cell phone, don't you? Shut it down, captain."

She was still holding the phone to her ear but gave a thumbs up.

"Why don't you three spread the word."

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They gathered at the smoke pit in the courtyard. A few dozen soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in wheelchairs and on crutches. Some listened from their windows, their heads and arms dotting the walls of the hotel which surrounded the courtyard on three sides. They were angry. They were powerless. Who do we blame? The colonel? For most of them he only existed in the abstract; some liminal force both real and unreal, capable of controlling their lives, their actions, manipulating their fears and desires towards his own ends. Another authority free of accountability. And so they blamed each other. Arguments spread over who hadn't been keeping their room clean, who spent more time playing Xbox or Playstation, who didn't cut their hair, shave, bathe, didn't render a proper salute, act professionally, ate too much pizza or Chinese takeout—

"Enough!" Rodriguez shouted.

He made his way to the front of the group, wheelchairs parting to let him through. All eyes reluctantly turning to him.

"Are we really going to turn on each other? Over one asshole's stupidity?" That got him a few laughs. "An asshole who's been here all of a few days and already thinks he knows how to the run the place, who thinks he can barge into *our* rooms, *our* PT

building whenever he pleases? Humiliate us?" Hell no, someone shouted. Rodriguez pointed at Jeff, "How long have you been here?" Thirteen months, Jeff replied. He pointed at someone else, "How long have you been here?" Ten months. "And you," he pointed to his left, "how long have you been here?" Two years, was the answer. Rodriguez paused and let that sink in.

"Walter Reed exists for us. *We* are the reason for that state-of-the-art PT building. *We* are the reason celebrities and politicians come here, supplying *them*," he pointed towards the administrative buildings, "with good PR and propaganda. *We* are the reason their budget has been doubled." Hell yeah! Damn straight! The crowd was nodding and clapping in agreement. "I don't know about you all, but I'm tired." Real fuckin tired! A shout from the middle of the crowd. "Tired of people grabbing my chair without permission." Yeah! "Tired of having my therapy interrupted by some chicken hawk senator or b-list actor offering to take a picture with me." Fuck those douchebags! "Tired of being told about my 'new normal.'" Hear, hear! Hell, yeah! Speakin truth! "Tired of being forced to live up to everyone *else's* expectations of how we should think and act!" Furious applause. "And I'm fucking tired of thinking we have no control around here!" The crowd was wild, clapping and waving canes in the air, surging towards him. "WE run this place!" Rodriguez shouted over the noise. A chant began seemingly from everyone all at once, "No play, no work! No play, no work! No play, no work!"

Back inside the group gathered around Rodriguez. It had grown larger as more people came down from their rooms and into the open lobby.

"What are your orders, Doc?" Anthony asked.

"I'm not giving any orders. But we do need to organize. We'll need volunteers." Everyone raised their hand. "Good, strength in numbers. First off, we'll need some counter-intel. People who can make some posters for propaganda and psy ops."

"I can do that," Anna said. She was an air force staff sergeant who had lost her left arm in a rocket attack. She was fairly new, having only been here a few months. Normally, she kept to herself in her room, went to PT in the afternoon when fewer people were there. She wasn't timid, Rodriguez thought, just quiet. He nodded to her and she raised her one fist in acknowledgement and then left to gather more members for her team.

"Okay, hopefully we won't need it, but a direct-action team would be nice."

"That's got my name all over it, Doc," Jeff said.

"Focus on gathering stuff to use as barricades, we'll need to be ready to block the entrances and stairwells in case they try to force us out."

"Roger that." Jeff raised his fist.

"Everyone else should help out where needed. Prepare some defenses or gather up enough food and meds to last us a few days. We're not going to ANY appointments until we get our video games back. They can't punish us all if we stick together!"

Rodriguez turned to Anthony. "I've got a special mission for you."

Two days later they were still holding strong. That first night, Rodriguez had called Darby's office and stated their demands. He hung up before the colonel's aide could respond. Soon after, all internet access in their rooms was shut off. They'd heard nothing since. But morale among them had never been higher. With no instruction they had eagerly organized themselves into four-man fireteams, each responsible for a set of windows or hallways. A rotating guard shift was set up at every entrance and a direct-action team waited in the lobby ready for anything. The building custodial staff had given

them the keys to the building, raising their fists to Rodriguez when they handed them over, and now they had unlimited access to the cafeteria as well as the roof, where they posted lookouts. The staff had also donated a few sets of walkie talkies, which were distributed throughout the building. If Darby thought he could wait them out, Anna had said, he was mistaken.

"Man, we shoulda done this sooner," Jeff said. "I'm fuckin' pumped."

"It's nice to feel useful again," Anna replied.

"I'm just glad to be a burden on my own terms for once," Rodriguez said. The others nodded.

OP1 to HQ, movement on the northwest of the courtyard. Coming down the path, looks like Darby and some aides, over.

Anna clicked on her radio, *Roger that, OP1, out.* "Looks like he finally wants to talk."

"We'll see," Rodriguez said.

They waited for Darby to come closer, so he could see what they had left for him. All along the building, along all three sides of the courtyard, the windows were plastered with posters. NO PLAY, NO WORK was the most predominant, with others like FUCK THE POLICE and ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US interspersed throughout. A large pirate flag hung from a window. From behind the glass doors Rodriguez could see Darby carefully scanning each sign, his disgust evident by the ever-growing scowl on his face. His aides stood nervously behind him. Rodriguez instructed the guard to unlock the door and then rolled out to meet him.

"This little insurrection of yours ends right now!" Darby said as soon as Rodriguez was out of the building. "If it doesn't, I'll have every last one of you charged and court martialed!"

Rodriguez snorted, "Good luck with that."

"Listen here, Aitch. Em. Two, this facility will not be held hostage and I will not negotiate with insurrectionists. This insubordination will end—"

"I'm sorry but we don't really care what you *think* is going to happen."

"How dare you, you—"

"And we don't much care for your indignant attitude." A round of banging echoed across the courtyard as those watching from the windows drummed their canes on the window frames. "It's time you recognized who holds the power around here. Us. You're here to serve us, to make sure we're getting the proper care we need. We're through with being treated as if we were children on timeout. Now, turn the internet back on and restore our video game access and we'll gladly return to our duties." More drumming. The aides took cautious steps back.

"I will not be ordered around by some enlisted man, a petty officer! I'm in command here and you will shut this, this, this charade down!"

"I think we'd prefer not to." Rodrigueuz smiled and crossed his arms.

"Fine. Seize him!"

Darby's aides hesitated a moment, and then rushed forward. A lieutenant grabbed his left arm and Rodrigueuz punched him in face. The lieutenant let out a sharp squeal that even had Rodrigueuz feeling embarrassed for him and crumpled to the ground. Before Rodrigueuz could reposition himself two captains clutched his arms from behind and tried to pull him out his chair.

"CHARGE!"

The captains paused and turned back to the building entrance. Out from the building burst Anthony on his Segway wearing a Che Guevara shirt followed by two others on Segways. They were wearing helmets and elbow pads, and wielding canes. Anthony pointed his cane forward like he was Patton galloping towards the enemy upon his steed.

“Go for their legs!” He shouted and soon they were upon the aides and slashing down on them. They rode circles around them, smacking and beating their thighs and calves. Projectiles were now reigning down from the windows; shoes, challenge coins, tomatoes; someone was firing BBs from a slingshot.

“Retreat!” Darby ordered. “Fall back!” The officers, laying in the fetal position, scrambled and stumbled to their feet. They sprinted shamelessly, trying to catch up with the colonel.

“NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK.” The chant grew louder as they shouted from their windows. The officers ran faster. Anthony and his team escorted Rodriguez back inside where the direct-action team prepared for a possible counterattack.

“Lock it down!” Rodriguez shouted.

Jeff reached for his radio and gave the signal, *Turtle up!*
Turtle up!

A flurry of activity ensued as they locked the doors. Empty wheelchairs and spare limbs and unused furniture that had been kept off to the side were now piled against the entrances. Fireteams on each floor pushed more wheelchairs down the stairwells. Every lookout and post were doubled up as they went to 100% security. Food and water were evenly distributed. Their time had come.

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Over the next thirty-six hours, the base MPs made several

probing attacks. The colonel's goons first tried to get in through the front entrance, rather than attempt another courtyard gauntlet, but found the way blocked by a lifted, yellow H2 Hummer and a black Mercedes Benz AMG (both courtesy of the government's tax-free \$50k/per limb compensation to each amputee). They then attempted a night raid through the courtyard, thinking the resistance would be asleep. They were beaten back by a combination of million-candle-power flashlights and water balloons filled with urine. Jeff was particularly proud of that idea. Then, on the fifth day, the real assault began.

They heard it first. The unmistakable sound of boots on pavement, marching. The lookouts on the roof confirmed what the others already knew, this was no probe. *I count at least 50 headed towards the courtyard, over.* It took ten minutes for the MPs to file in, riot shields over their heads, boots clomping in a methodical rhythm, but the resistance held their fire. They formed up five troops wide, all that could fit through the doors at one time. Rodriguez, Anthony, Jeff, Anna and two dozen of Jeff's direct-action team stood ready to face them at ground level, a mountain of twisting metal and rubber separating the two sides.

Panic seized Rodriguez for a moment as he considered what was about to happen and all he had done to bring it about. He may not have forced his comrades into mutiny, but he couldn't help but feel responsible for the real danger they all now faced. Had he been right? Were these actions justified? Was their cause doomed? He began to cycle through a dozen similar questions he hadn't contemplated before and the weight of it all nearly sent him to grab the nearest white flag, until Anthony placed an arm around his shoulders.

"If we could only see us now," Anthony said, smiling.

Rodriguez looked up and down the line and saw the same determination in every face. His panic passed. Doomed or not.

Right or wrong. They were together.

It happened all at once. The MPs rushed forward, quickly smashing through the glass doors. The window teams opened fire with an assortment of heavy and disgusting objects. The MPs responded with pepper spray, but their range was limited and could only reach up to the second floor. Both sides dragged away their wounded. The front rows of MPs were grabbing and tossing all the debris in the blockade aside, passing it over their heads to be carried back and out of the way. "Hit em with the balloons!" Jeff barked. They crashed and broke against the barricade, spraying the MPs with all their contents. The front row disappeared as they retreated out of the line of fire but were quickly replaced by those behind them. The two sides repeated the cycle for several minutes, but the MPs were removing the debris far quicker than the resistance could deplete their ranks, and eventually the MPs broke through.

"LAN Warriors, charge!" Jeff sprinted towards the breach. Rodriguez nearly choked laughing, but he and the others followed right behind. The next moments were a blur of canes and batons being swung back and forth. Two men, one in a chair, the other on crutches, fell to the floor, blood spilling down their faces. They were quickly dragged off. Rodriguez and the others were slowly being pushed back by the MPs, lacking the leg power needed to hold their ground. The MPs had given up on pepper spray now that they were in close quarters, switching to their tasers instead. Two more amputees on the left flank went down, bloodied, forcing the remaining men on that side to fall back and cede ground. The MPs quickly took advantage and Rodriguez and Jeff found themselves surrounded, batons coming in from all sides. Rodriguez fought back with all he had, swinging his cane like a baseball bat, chopping down like an axe. He smashed one MP in the nose, sending a gush of blood spraying out. Jeff knocked another out cold, he had lost his cane and was now punching any uniform he

could reach. An intense pain surged through Rodriguez and he lost control of himself as his body seized up. He fell out of his chair and was convulsing on the ground as two MPs tried to drag him off.

He heard a scream from somewhere in the mass of bodies and he couldn't tell if it was one of his or one theirs, but then Anna burst from the crowd and threw herself at the MPs dragging him. "Get Doc outta here!" There were new hands on him now, dragging him away from the fight, further inside the building. Anthony screeched by on his Segway and drove straight into the mass of uniforms, disappearing as he flew over the handle bars. The last glimpse he got of Anna before the MPs surrounded her was of her swinging her prosthetic arm like a club.

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Now in the casualty collection point, Rodriguez had time to think again. He was badly bruised and sore from where his muscles had tensed themselves up into knots after being electrocuted but looking around it was clear he had gotten off easy. Nearly two dozen people lay about the floor in different states of shock and injury. Most had blood leaking from gashes in their heads, some lay unconscious, others had their arms in slings. A group in the far corner were busy pouring milk over their faces and sitting in front of large fans. A man Rodriguez didn't recognize lay next to him, struggling to wipe the blood from his eyes with the stubs of his arms. Rodriguez leaned over and pulled a bandage from his pocket. He did his best to wipe the blood from the man's face and then applied the bandage to the wound on his forehead.

"Thanks, Doc," the man said before groggily closing his eyes.

It was all too much for him now as the panic crept its way back into his chest. How many had new concussions? Rodriguez thought. How many broken bones? How long would their recovery

now be delayed because of these new injuries? He began to shake and he lost the strength in his arms, and fell back against the wall. He took another look around the room and nearly burst into tears. "I thought I was done with this," he said to himself. He could still hear the sounds of battle going on in the lobby. The banging, the shouting. He tried to cover his ears but the sounds were too loud and slipped past his fingers. There was only one thing he could do. He pushed himself back up and crawled from patient to patient, tending to their wounds.

The fight went on for thirty more minutes until the MPs retreated. A second direct-action team had arrived as Rodriguez was being pulled away and managed to hold the lobby. Jeff found Rodriguez and gave him the quick AAR: half of their resistance was injured, and of those, half could still fight. Several members were missing, including Anna and Anthony, and were presumed captured. They'd depleted all their water balloons and most of the projectiles. But, Jeff said, we still own this place. No MPs got past the lobby.

Rodriguez was quiet. Anna. Anthony. Everybody. They sacrificed themselves, for me, for my dumb plan, he finally said.

"No. They did it for themselves," Jeff answered. "Look around, man. Even with blood and pepper spray in their faces, they're laughing."

Word had spread of the MP's retreat and the mood in the room had shifted to an exhilaration not unlike that after a firefight. The exhilaration of fear and of being alive. Of having fought and won. It became clear to Rodriguez that the outcome of this mutiny no longer mattered, had probably never mattered. He climbed back into his chair and he and Jeff headed to the lobby.

A voice from a bullhorn echoed in the courtyard.

"HM2 Rodriguez. I think we've all had enough of this and are

ready to come to an agreement." It was Darby. "Unless you'd rather I throw your friends in the brig."

Rodriguez and Jeff approached the window. Darby stood in the courtyard with a team of MPs in SWAT gear. Anna and Anthony sat handcuffed and bandaged at his feet.

"That motherfucker," Jeff said.

"I'm willing to restore full internet access and grant everyone immunity if you end this rebellion now," Darby continued, "Well, not everyone. HM2 Rodriguez will have to face punishment. Someone has to, after all this destruction."

"Fuck that, Doc. If anyone needs to be punished it's that asshole."

"No. We've won," Rodriguez said. "We did it."

"But you can't just turn yourself—"

"I don't want anyone else hurt over this." Rodriguez looked over his shoulder at the guards by the doors, still defiant despite bandages on their heads and torn shirts, one of them raised his fist. "We got what we needed."

Jeff nodded reluctantly and clapped his hand on Rodriguez's shoulder.

*

It was silent when he rolled out to Darby. The grin and arrogance from Darby's face was gone. It was clear he hadn't slept at all for the past five days and looked as though he had lost twenty pounds, his uniform hanging off his shoulders and arms. Rodriguez raised his fist at Anna and Anthony and they both smiled in return. Darby said nothing to him, didn't even look at him, just signaled for the MPs who came and handcuffed Rodriguez's arms behind his back. They took hold of his chair and began pushing him towards a patrol car on the

far side of the courtyard.

They were halfway down the courtyard when a single voice shouted from the windows, "NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Others joined in and the chant quickly spread around the courtyard.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK."

A prosthetic leg came sailing out from a third-floor window. Another came from the second floor across the way. Then an arm, a foot. More and more came tumbling out of the windows in a cascade of limbs all around the courtyard. The chant got louder and built up to a thunderous echo, bouncing off the walls and the trees, rising, rising, rising above the buildings and out across the street and into Rock Creek Park, down Georgia Ave and downtown and into the Capitol, the National Mall, the White House.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Rodriguez laughed and laughed, tears streaming from his eyes, as he was wheeled down the path and out of sight.