

This is an excerpt from *Imaginary Year*, a work of serial fiction by Jeremy P. Bushnell. Visit the *Imaginary Year* website (<http://www.ImaginaryYear.com>) on Mondays and Fridays for new updates.

## 66 / COMBATANTS

Clark is in her office, looking up documents in Google. She's researching the status of the “enemy combatants”—U.S. citizens detained because of their involvement with terrorists. *Alleged* involvement. Yasser Esam Hamdi, born in Louisiana, found fighting with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Jose Padilla, born in Brooklyn, detained forty-five minutes away from her apartment, at Chicago's O'Hare airport, on suspicion of involvement with a bomb plot. Her research so far has revealed nothing about either of them being charged with any crimes, or any details about when either of them will go to trial or receive counsel.

How is that legal? It seems obvious to her that it can't be legal. They're citizens, and citizens have Constitutional rights. But no. Google tells her that on June 19 the government released a brief stating that enemy combatants do not have the right to a lawyer, and that the American judiciary has no standing to intervene. Hamdi had a hearing scheduled for June 20, during which the government was expected to indicate what charges it may file against him: she can't figure out if it ever took place.

She wants to know how this is legal. (The government has dragged out a precedent, something about an American who was working for the Nazis during WWII.) She wants to know if they could do it to her, to her friends who are activists. She knows people who were arrested, in Philly, during the Republican National Convention in 2000. Police raided the Ministry of Puppetganda warehouse, destroyed the puppets, arrested about seventy puppet-makers—charged them with trumped-up weapons charges, which were dropped months

later because of the lack of evidence. She thinks about things like that and she wonders if she will wake up one morning to learn that the government has performed a handkerchief trick and reclassified her and her friends as enemy combatants, locking them away until the time when America sees fit to declare the War on Terrorism over.

Sometimes she worries about that. Other times she figures that she's protected because she's middle-class and white, unlike Hamdi and Padilla. But that thought is hardly a comfort.

She memorizes the names of her enemies, feeds them back into Google to learn more. Paul J. McNulty, a U.S. attorney who has argued, on behalf of Don Rumsfeld, that meetings between enemy combatants and lawyers could allow vital information to be transmitted to terrorists. Elsewhere he's prosecuted software pirates. Deputy Solicitor Paul D. Clement, the author of the June 19 brief. Elsewhere he's argued that school-wide drug testing would be Constitutional.

She is deep in the middle of this process, building up a red pyramid of rage inside her, when Janine comes in. —Hey, Janine says.

Clark has a pen clenched in her teeth. —Mm, she says.

—Good to see you, says Janine. She puts her hands on Clark's shoulders and begins to rub. But Clark is in no mood to be touched. She pulls the pen out and flicks it down onto her desk.

—Listen, Clark says. —Could you not?

Janine puts her hands up, backs away. —*Sorry*, she says icily, drawing the word out exaggeratedly, until it has stretched over three syllables.

—Sorry, says Clark. —It's just—I'm just feeling tense right now.

—Yeah, Janine says. —I figure, you know, a backrub generally *helps* with tension?

—No, I mean, yeah, sure, says Clark, pinching the bridge of her nose. She agrees, of course. But she does not want to relax. She has learned, over the years, to use her tension as energy. She has learned that it can set her in motion, as though she were a crankshaft, turned by the explosion behind a piston. But this is a hard thing to explain: say to someone *I want to be tense* and they will think you are crazy.

—I'm just, Clark says, —I'm just not in the mood.

—OK, Janine says. What she thinks is *you're never in the mood, anymore*. —I'll see you later. She turns, and goes back out the door.

—Hey, Clark says. She feels as though she's been misunderstood, and this pains her.

—Hey, she says again. But Janine either doesn't hear, or she pretends that she doesn't.

Either way, she does not come back.