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## Flash

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**Flash**

By

Stephen Thomas Nelson Krichels  
B.A. University of Maine, 2018

A THESIS Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)

The Graduate School  
University of Maine  
May 2020

Advisory Committee:

Hollie Adams, Assistant Professor of English

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## **Flash**

By Stephen Thomas Nelson Krichels  
Thesis Advisor: Dr. Hollie Adams

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented in  
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts  
(in English)  
May 2020

This thesis is a short novel drawing on science-fiction, military-fiction, and realistic-fiction genres to explore the difficulties faced by deployed soldiers and those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The themes and difficulties contained within the narrative were generated by my personal relations and experiences with combat veterans, as well as research conducted through published academic works and communication with a neuroscience researcher. While the aim of this text is to further existing dialogues between veterans, active duty military, and civilians, it is also meant to be an enjoyable read for those interested in the genres mentioned above.

**Acknowledgements:**

With special thanks to Hollie Adams for her advice, support, and patience throughout the writing of this thesis. And additional thanks to Jessica Aronis for her expertise in psychological studies and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This would have been a different and poorer work without the help I got from both of you.

## Critical Introduction

*Flash* started as an attempt to let an audience experience the symptoms of a disorder a number of people I've known have, and which I've seen used as characterization or a plot device with increasing frequency as I get older. The disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, "is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event" (American Psychiatric Association), and is characterized by the following:

disturbing thoughts and feelings related to their experience that last long after the traumatic event has ended. They may relive the event through flashbacks or nightmares; they may feel sadness, fear or anger; and they may feel detached or estranged from other people. People with PTSD may avoid situations or people that remind them of the traumatic event, and they may have strong negative reactions to something as ordinary as a loud noise or an accidental touch. (American Psychiatric Association)

I wanted to write a narrative that left its audience wondering if what they were reading was real, wondering *how* unreliable the protagonist was, not just *if* the protagonist was unreliable. I failed to make *Flash* into a narrative that does this. Perhaps it is misleading to call it, outright, a failure. By the end of writing *Flash*, my goals for the piece were not the same anymore. I still wanted to work with PTSD, still wanted it to matter to the narrative, to the audience, but before I was even halfway through the novel, I realized that the effort going into making *Flash* realize its original intention was paralyzing, it was hurting my other goals, goals for the piece and for myself. I wanted the end result of my work to be enjoyable, to hold together well, to be writing I was glad to attach my name to. This came to a head for me during the 2019 Fall semester when one of my students asked me to read over some of their own fictional writing during office hours. The student wasn't an English major, nor were they in a field usually considered artistic or writing-

intensive. Their writing was great, and the passion they had for it showed in their work in a way that I realized was absent in everything I had written for my thesis so far. So a little before finals week of that semester, I scrapped all of the writing I'd done, reprioritized, reengaged, and restarted with just the bones of my initial concept. The end result is the version of *Flash* which you have just read, a version that is about half the length I set out for it to be, did not accomplish its original purpose, and ended up making use of a lot of the feelings and affiliations created by the conflicts in the Middle East that I originally intended to avoid. It is the version I am going to discuss here, and the version I think is better for every way it failed to be what I wanted it to be.

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My reasoning for wanting to work with PTSD is more extensive than just its proximity to my life via my interpersonal relationships. That proximity isn't limited to friends who are, or used to be, in the military; it extends into my civilian relationships as well, though not nearly as extensively. The proximity offered perspective, enough perspective to see a few of the ways it affected the lives of those living with it, and enough perspective to know how much I did not want to misrepresent what I was working with. I am fortunate in that I have a close friend who has studied PTSD more thoroughly than I had time to do and was willing to both supply me with resources and read over what I had written. According to a report by Hannah Fischer of the Congressional Research Service, almost 140,000 deployed service members were diagnosed with PTSD between 2000 and part of 2015. For context, *Forbes* published an article by Niall McCarthy stating that between September 11, 2001 and the date the article was published, March 20, 2018, 2.77 million troops were deployed. This means, then, that approximately 5% of those who were deployed have been diagnosed with PTSD, but this does not account for those who remain undiagnosed. With access to the help and resources, I wanted to write something that

might have even a small chance of communicating that people are trying to understand and bridge the gaps that PTSD can create. I tried to avoid romanticizing the disorder in my writing, which is part of the reason my protagonist, Kent, is flawed in the ways that he is. His characterization isn't defined by his PTSD: it didn't make him cheat on his wife with Pickmin, and it doesn't rationalize his belief that by sacrificing himself at the end of the book he'll somehow atone for his unrelated transgressions. He's just a man, and his condition is something that he works around in the ways he believes are best, even when they are not, and even when they could endanger those around him.

At times, the ways in which Kent “works around” his condition are actually a product of the condition itself. Throughout *Flash* Kent retreats from his emotions, often into his training as a soldier and a sergeant; this represents one of the symptoms of PTSD as detailed by Mathew Boden in a *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* article, “Emotion Regulation and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Prospective Investigation,” in which Boden writes, “current conceptualizations of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) hold that it is in part a disorder of experiential and emotional avoidance, as individuals with PTSD attempt to limit or avoid exposure to trauma-related cues and associated emotional reactivity” (297). This emotional avoidance is one of two forms of “emotional regulation,” the other form being cognitive reappraisal. Cognitive reappraisal, “which involves changing one’s thinking so as to change one’s emotional responses[,] is considered an antecedent-focused strategy, as it is typically used to modulate an emotional response prior to its complete unfolding” (Boden 297). According to certain cognitive models, individuals with PTSD may “over-utilize” avoidant regulation and under-utilize cognitive reappraisal, thus the frequency of Kent’s emotional distancing, and this can actually exacerbate the PTSD, and “produce a sense of current threat” (Boden 297). Whether

or not Kent's persistent unease throughout *Flash* is a product of his PTSD or his subconscious accurately evaluating the danger posed by the "spooks" is intentionally unspecified; depending on how early the audience picks up on Kent's PTSD symptoms, the audience may wonder about the reliability of the feeling of the narrator, in turn allowing them to feel something of the uncertainty Kent feels at times. If the audience does not pick up on the PTSD symptoms early enough for that, they may still feel that uncertainty due to the precariousness of the setting. If the originally-intended narrative had played out, PTSD would have defined the work; as it is now, it is only featured. As a metaphor for a disorder's place in a person's life, that feels more right to me. No one element of a person, or character, defines the entirety of the individual. In a short story, a single dominating element might be appropriate, but for a longer work such as *Flash*, the work should be more complex, similar to an individual person. Ergo, PTSD shouldn't define the work, only work within it, and around its other facets.

The other side of Kent's trauma throughout the narrative, his amnesia, is separate from his PTSD but also has played a role in the lives of a number of people I know. To be more accurate, his Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), is a form of injury with varied consequences and causal factors, so much so that my only qualm with having it dominate so much of my work was that amnesia is such a trope in storytelling that it has become somewhat hackneyed. If there is an original way to use amnesia left in the world I could not find it. Still, the delicacy of the human brain and the fallout from injuring it are severe, and I wanted them to work in my narrative. Kent's frustration with not being able to remember what happened, and by extension not be able to protect the people he cares about, carry towards this end, and also connect his character to me to a degree. I have had several mild TBIs, and while I do not usually think of them as having affected my life beyond the week or two it took me to recover from the more severe ones, I



sometimes wonder how they may have changed my life without my noticing. I'll never know, and neither will Kent. Kent didn't have to wonder, but had he survived the end of *Flash*, he could have spent the rest of his life wondering if he could have saved his men if he had just remembered what happened a little earlier.

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Writing *Flash* was a learning experience for me. I didn't have to do the intensive research that some theses require, but the process and finished work taught me about myself. I don't mean this in an "I never thought I could write something this long" kind of way, but rather that writing in the setting I chose forced me to confront an anger I was not aware I was hanging onto. The characters in *Flash* are subjects of a war that has been going on their whole lives, a war perpetrated by interests other than their own, and interests they are not entirely privy to. When I write that I failed to avoid the affiliations of the U.S. conflict in the Middle East, I am referring to the continual Big Power vs. Small(er) Power conflict. It was not my plan to have the war in *Flash* take this form; I actually took a number of steps to create distance between the setting of *Flash* and themes I felt would link to the audience's knowledge and experience with conflict in the Middle East. In my first draft, the narrative was set in a desert; I switched to a forest setting when I restarted after realizing how the previous location would play into a Western audience's experiences and feelings, subconscious or otherwise. Moving the setting of the narrative from the present to a future with similar technology works to the same end. In *Flash*, politicians are referred to as "Legislators," nations are not named beyond referencing the nation the characters are in as "The Forest," and technology is defined by type rather than by specific model (Humvee standing for "High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle," and carbine/rifle/sidearm only referring to the size/type of weapon being employed rather than referencing a recognizable brand

are examples of this). The war itself is not intended as a focal point; it is just part of the setting in a way that the series of conflicts the U.S. has been involved with in the Middle East has been for my life. Even for Kent and his men, the war is there, but they don't think about it all that much as they go about their job. They think about the military they are a part of, they think about the enemy, but with an attitude often similar to that of a workplace. The only person who talks about ending the war as a real possibility is Taksa, and Kent thinks he is crazy because of it.

At the same time, the characters are not dispassionate about the war. They have a lot of their own anger, and it is directed at both sides. Kent and his men hate the Foresters, the enemy, for killing their friends. They want blood for blood, even as they just want to survive to see another day. They also have anger at the people higher up the chain of command, the people who run the war on a macro level and give orders that get their friends killed. Taksa isn't meant as an unsympathetic character; his rhetoric has a certain pathos, or even logos, to it. His methods are clearly unethical, but his end result is to save as many soldiers' lives as possible, soldiers he is responsible for as an officer.

I was young when 9/11 happened, and as a byproduct of the aforementioned TBIs, as well as other factors, my memory of my childhood is limited, but the dual desire to simultaneously keep people safe by leaving the rest of the world alone and also to ensure that the organization that attacked us is eradicated is not a foreign one. This desire is amplified for the soldiers in *Flash* as it should be. Just before I started my first semester in UMaine's graduate program, I was sent to Fort Knox by the ROTC program. I spent about three weeks there, and in those three weeks, I came to trust the members of my squad more than I have ever trusted a civilian acquaintance. I knew how the training was meant to restructure the trainees' thinking as a form of indoctrination; I thought because I was aware of it that it would not have the same

effect on me, but it did it anyway. I ended up leaving the program early for personal reasons, but I still trust those people to the same extent. The experts who design military training programs know what they are doing—the bond that they foster between soldiers can lead to every bit of the anger towards the enemy that the characters in *Flash* have and more, and it is what sometimes blurs the line between right and wrong actions the way it did for Taksa. Chapter XI is titled “The moral high ground” because it is the chapter in which Kent commits to maintaining the legal and ethical path through the war that Taksa surrendered. The training the soldiers receive in maintaining the moral high ground is practical as well as ethical; it serves the end goal of winning hearts and minds, one of the strategies employed by the United States during the “War on Terror.” It was in an attempt to win over Forester natives that Kent ended up becoming close with the boy whom he has flashbacks of accidentally killing. It is one of his more humanizing moments in the story, a point at which the audience can see the man beneath the sergeant’s mask and understand some of the guilt that he carries with him—guilt that drove him away from a wife he perceives as both too innocent to understand, and too innocent for him to want her to know the things he has done.

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*Flash* was meant to be 100,000 words when I started it. This is in part because I do not like reading novels that are under 500 pages long because I want the stories I engage with for my own interests to take me more time than a shorter work would grant me. This preference led me to be more familiar with pacing for a work of that length. The works I drew the most inspiration from are Marko Kloos’ *Frontlines* series, which are shorter than my typical reads, but are in the military fiction genre, albeit placed in a much different setting and leaning heavily into the science-fiction genre as well. Kloos’ works are the ones that first piqued my interest in military

fiction as a genre, and did so well before I had much of the knowledge of the U.S. military I've since accumulated through incidental life events. Kloos excels at creating realistic interpersonal relationships between his characters within a military environment, and in thinking on the various plots and subplots of his works, I realized that the antagonizing force in military fiction works is often not the "enemy" as it is portrayed at first, but rather the antagonizing force often originates from conflicting interests within an allied force. It isn't the Foresters whom Kent has to overcome in *Flash*, for instance, because while they are a threat to him and his men, it is Taksa and his intentions to save the lives of soldiers like Kent himself who are the greatest source of danger. In light of Taksa's plans, the Foresters become a part of the setting, being almost reduced to a hazardous part of the environment rather than the primary antagonist of the narrative. This concept is corroborated by authors such as Brent Weeks in his *Nightangel Trilogy* who, while writing in a different genre altogether (fantasy), complicate their narratives by writing from multiple perspectives, even perspectives which seem to be antagonistic towards each other, until the audience obtains enough information to see the way the various subplots tie together, at which point the true crux of the narrative becomes clear. Writing in a single perspective allowed me to better focus my narrative on the themes and concepts I've already discussed, but prevented the utilization of multiple perspectives in a way similar to Weeks. Nevertheless, Weeks' elaborate plots influenced my decision to hold off on presenting the audience with the primary antagonist from the beginning, another shift from my initial draft of *Flash* to its current iteration. All things considered, *Flash* trends more towards realism than the books I drew inspiration from when writing it. The most fantastic element of the work is the physical environment it contains, a forest that is equal parts jungle and redwood with swaths of uninhabited terrain between its urban areas so great that they are never encountered during the

events of the story beyond Kent's flashbacks. Working within realistic fiction, science fiction, and military fiction genres was a decision meant to attract audiences that are fans of any one of those three genres, and introduce those that were not familiar with the struggles faced by members of the military and those with PTSD to some of the elements of that struggle, especially those readers that are teens or younger adults that may not have had the experience or education yet to be familiar with such grim realities.

Returning to my desire to write a 100,000 word text, it is pertinent to mention that it was mostly about ego, about proving to myself that I could write a work of that length and that I could write it with relative speed. If *Flash* was to have a sequel, I already know its plot because it would be all the things I cut to make it the length that it is now. To make that into one book would require a substantial reworking from what the current version is now, reworking that would, I think, take away the elements of the work that make it into something I am satisfied with, and also create a break in the narrative current as the setting is pulled away from the Forest and into Kent's home nation. Doubling the length in this way would dilute and distract from the potency of the actions, characters, and themes contained within the current version. Giving the audience that much more time and information to work with could also reduce the surprise of the narrative's turns, further cheapening the work. Avoiding the bruise to my ego that comes with cutting the length down to a more appropriate size is not a good enough reason to reduce the quality of the work itself. It was a learning experience in terms of allowing the narrative to guide itself to an appropriate endpoint, rather than attempting to force it to follow the path I had set out for it.

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## Prologue: What the mind won't let go

My world is a bleary mess of shouting and the sharp reports of rifle fire underlined by the deeper bone shaking base notes of explosions. I can feel the hard ergonomic grip of my carbine where it digs into my palms beneath white knuckles, the scratching and biting of insects as they feast on my flesh, unconcerned with the chaos of the world, and the gnarled roots of trees which populate this alien land.

Something tickles at my incognizant brain, something important, squashed down by thousands of years of lizard instincts dominating this one crucial moment in my life. All that time compressed into a span of seconds, muting all higher thought and demanding one thing of my body: *stay down*.

Nerve endings fire across my face, signaling pressure from an external source. The pressure is heated, and followed by the slow trickle of moisture as it rolls its slow way towards the bottom of my face. The moisture is warm, even against the flush of skin burning with adrenaline. My head aches.

But there is another feeling, and more sound, hidden behind this harsh reality. Stiff fabric, laundered without the commodity of fabric softener, rubs its coarseness against me, and a rapid *beep beep beep* sounds from some sort of machine that's near and far at the same time. Despite the base instinct screaming in my mind not to move, to worm my way through the soft soil of the ground to safety, I lift my head, turning it like the meerkats I watched on television growing up, hunting for the source of the noise. I can make out nothing, my eyes are open but the only images being transcribed by my brain are dark masses of greens and browns, cut through in places with piercing flashes of yellow.

Slowly, so slowly, everything fades away to black, the harsh noises dull and meld into a constant drone, not dissimilar to the beeping but louder, more urgent, more present. Then that too passes on, leaving me alone in the dark.



## Chapter I: Alone in the dark

There has never been a transition for me between sleep and wake, or if there was I never remember it. One moment, nothing, in the next, life in all its various splendor.

I wish that were the case this time.

The first faculties to return to me are my tactile senses, singing me songs of their recent abuse, though I can't for the life of me remember what I've done to them. Their voices are offkey, high and tight on some notes, low and jumbled in others. It creates a cacophony of pain that reverberates up and down my prone form. I wince in response, trying to curl in on myself, to reduce my surface area in a vain attempt to hide from my own body. It does not work as something restrains my limbs, thick and soft, wrapped around my wrists and ankles. I panic, struggling for freedom, in the process sending fresh songs of exquisite discomfort radiating back to my brain. I stop struggling and confine myself to opening my eyes to see the source of my impediment. Only, I can't. My eyes don't open, the world remains dark. Fresh panic surges into me, lighting my veins on fire and for a brief moment stomping out the pain while I make frantic attempts to reach my eyes with my hands.

It's at this second that my hearing springs to life, and brings with it a staccato beeping from somewhere to my left. Some part of me that isn't in control right now recognizes the noise of a heart monitor from all the heartache hours spent listening to them in hospital rooms of my friends and brothers. Then more noises join it, the rapid stamping of feet as they carry their owners down tiled halls, the bustle of multiple bodies as they surround me, and finally the cool tones of authority riding on an unfamiliar voice.

"Just relax, son, you're okay."

The soldier in me takes over, ushering my panic into a corner of my confused consciousness so that more rational neurons can fire. Through ragged breaths I manage to get out, “I can’t see.” There is a substantial bustling of movement around me and the beeping quiets so that it’s present but no longer dominating the sound of the room.

“Your eyes are fine, you have bandages covering them is all. They’ll come off in a day—” the same authoritative tone replies, and there’s an intake of breath as though it’s going to continue before a jocular voice inserts itself into the space between words:

“Yeah man, you’ll thank us later for sparing you from having to look at your ugly ass an extra twenty-four hours. It’s a mercy, trust me.”

“Jacobs, is that you?” Relief steals the tension from my body as I recognise my smartass specialist. Hands are moving around my body now, doing manual checks to corroborate the readouts from the machines I can only assume I’m hooked up to.

“Present, Sarge.” The asshole is smirking, I can feel it, but there’s a tautness to his humor which conveys a depth of concern I have heard only on rare occasions.

“Jacobs, what the fuck happened?”

“We were hit, hard, but we’re okay now.”

“Where’s the rest of the squad?”

Before Jacobs can answer the first voice takes over again: “Sergeant Kent, this is Colonel Taksa. I’m in command of the facility you’re in right now. I know you’re concerned for your men, but you need to recover and get your bearings before resuming your duties. Your platoon took heavy casualties, but your squad pulled through, you are the most severely wounded. More information than that can wait. For now, let the doctors here take care of you, and we’ll talk more in the morning. That’s an order.” The cool command of his voice lightens with the addition

of the last words, but not so much that I doubt his seriousness about waiting to ask more questions.

“Yes, sir,” I reply with automation born through years of practice.

“You as well, Specialist Jacobs, let’s give the doctors room to work.” There is a pregnant pause before Jacobs also gives the mandated affirmation to the received order, and during that pause, I believe he might object, but the affirmation does come, and I feel a hand rest on my leg as Jacobs wishes me well on his way out the door, followed by a second set of footsteps presumably belonging to the colonel.

“Sir,” I call out, and the footsteps pause. “My restraints?” I leave the question open-ended, hoping the officer will fill in the blanks for me.

“For your own good, the doctors said you might exacerbate your injuries if you moved around too much. I know it can’t be comfortable, I’ll have a word with the head of the medical staff.” With that the footsteps resume only to fade a moment later, leaving me alone in the dark, encompassed by the busy efficiency of wordless medical personnel.

With my sight unavailable every sound in the room is like artillery fire. The creak of the bed when I shift my weight causes my skin to prickle. I crane my neck—like it will do any good in my blindfolded state—at the shuffling of scrubs passing by in the hallway outside of the room where I lie, strapped to a bed. At one point the slam of a drawer echoes down the hall and I buck at the invisible straps around my limbs. The violent motion brings with it an awareness of a dozen tears and perforations around my body I wasn’t aware of before. Once I notice the damage I can’t un-notice it. It keeps me lying awake like that for what feels like an eternity but must only be hours. At one point I begin to wonder why I don’t need to pee and gain an immediate knowledge of tubes I would have preferred I remain ignorant of. These too keep me awake.

Given the infrequency of what noise I do hear, thunderous as it may seem to my heightened auditory senses, leads me to believe that it was deep into the night when I awoke. No medical facility I've ever been in came close to this level of quiet. There was always the squeaking of gurney wheels, the rushing past of overworked nurses, the crying of families, and the drone of the same television channels irrespective of time, place, or culture. This building, wherever it is, has none of these things. In their place is a clinical silence, the kind of silence that only forms when noise has been surgically removed by the keenest intention. If I could see, could move, could interact with my environment in any meaningful way, I might have enjoyed such quiet. After the last few months enduring the constant low level drone of insects, the revving of diesel engines as they propelled tires through the mucky bogs of this foreign country, and the occasional deafening bursts of noise that broke out when antiquated artillery shells would hurtle down through the canopy of treetops and land near, on, or in our base, I would have spent half my accumulated combat pay on a couple days of quiet. Instead, the silence takes another sense from me, leaving me a prisoner in my own head, if only for a night.

Left with little alternative, I seek refuge in the only activity available to me, my thoughts. I feel alert to the world around me, limited though my ability to interact with it is, but my memories are foggy. Like words on the tip of my tongue, they lurk just beyond my ability to produce them. I remember leaving the base with my platoon. Eight humvees winding their way through the trees on a narrow dirt road. Lt. Ricks would have been in the lead vehicle with Squad One Alpha, followed by squad one bravo, which would put me in the third vehicle with squad two alpha and the rest in order behind us. That's how we always moved. I can see the image of one-bravo's tail end in front of us as we pulled through the base gates, but the further down the road we got, the blurrier details become until everything outside our vehicle is just haze. It's dark

haze, we left early, before sun-up. Of course, it was a last-minute mission brought to us with the arrival of that new captain. Wilten? Walton? Something with a “W.” I decide Cpt. W is good enough for now. It’s not like I can be charged with disrespecting an officer in my head.

If I can’t remember what’s outside the vehicle, I can at least work with what happened inside. Jacobs and Jarez are talking shit. Jacobs is saying something about the river, Jarez is taking his helmet off so that he can pretend to bury his face in it and cover his ears. It’s a violation of regs to remove protective equipment outside of a safe zone, but everyone does it from time to time and brass knows to pick its battles. From my position in the back I can see tears seeping out of Jarez’s eyes and the bright white of his teeth contrasting the brown of his skin in the little pre-dawn light that finds its way through the leaves and into our humvee. His shoulders are heaving with laughter, I feel my eyes roll at whatever Jacobs is saying, but can’t remember the sounds of his words. I do recall the gesticulations of his hands, first one, then the other, but never having both off the wheel at the same time, never relaxing the grip of the hand guiding our vehicle along the broken dirt road. His eyes never leave the road either, constantly scanning the surface for irregularities, for disturbed patches of ground our vehicle will have to pass over or near. It’s why Jacobs is always our driver, he has that particular knack for absolute focus even when most people would be distracted. Most people take years to train that knack. Jacobs had it the day I met him, and I’ve never seen him slip.

I turn my remembrance away from what they’re saying, frustrated that I can’t bring back the details of their conversation. Ricky’s legs protrude down from the hole in the roof of the vehicle, his upper half stationed on our vehicle’s heavy gun. Ricky is shifting his weight around, constantly moving side to side, up and down, the thick muscles of his quadriceps straining the usually baggy uniform pants that struggle to contain them. I feel as secure as I can outside the

base with Ricky up there on that gun, I don't need to push myself to remember that feeling. None of us in the squad have ever been able to figure out if Ricky has a sixth sense or is just so paranoid that he's never surprised. My good money is on both.

In the seat to my right is Half-calf; Havcoff I correct myself. I've been trying not to fall into the habit of using Jacobs's nickname for him like the rest of the platoon since I can't tell if Havcoff likes it or not. I can't tell if he likes *anything* or not. He hasn't been in the platoon long enough for people to stop accidentally calling him Hendricks, the soldier Havcoff replaced. Havcoff is staring out the window, intent on his surveyance of whatever exists in the blurry mess my memory forms outside the vehicle. I remember following suit, and returning my attention to the exterior on my side of the vehicle as well.

I stop trying to remember the mission, everything past that is the same blur that replaced whatever was outside the humvee. Trying to remember is making my head feel as though it's splitting down the middle. Realizing my body tensed during my failed attempt to recall what happened, I force it to relax one limb at a time. My consciousness continues to push at the memory the same way I'd continue to run my tongue over a split in my lip. Salting the wound and accomplishing nothing. I need to distract it, to give my relentless, damaged brain something just as pathological to work over.

The image of my wife flits across the blurred mess and I seize hold of it, allowing it to drag me away from the time in the vehicle with my men.

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Maria's arm loops around my waist from behind, I can feel her chin where it presses into my shoulder, her neck craning to give it the height it needs to attain that perch.

“It’s always so sunny out when you leave,” she says, her eyes no doubt fixing on the view outside our kitchen window, just like mine do. I turn my back on the picturesque scene beyond the two-pane window, leaning against the sink below the sill and resting my hands on my wife’s hips.

“It’s just our country’s way of letting me know how happy it is to get rid of me again.” The half-smile on her lips is the same one she’s had since the first time I saw her in the grocery store, one of many rogue blonde curls caught in the corner of her mouth waiting for me to brush it aside and kiss her. Guilt eats at me when I see that smile, and a shameful part of me can’t wait for my departure so that I can lock it away again. I drag my fingers across her cheek, catching the stray lock and detaining it behind her ear. She leans in, pressing her forehead to my lips before I can kiss hers.

“Promise me one more time.” The whisper barely makes it past the thick fabric of my uniform blouse.

“This is the last time,” I say.

“No, the other promise.”

“You know how I feel about that.”

“I need to hear it.”

“I’ll come back to you.” Never have words eaten at me so much as those do when I say them, but they’re the least that she deserves and the most that I can do, even if I can’t be sure that I’ll keep them.

She tilts her head back to kiss me. It doesn’t feel like a reward for my words so much as being let back behind the walls of a tenuous ally. Maria didn’t deserve any of this, and I suspect that if she’d known how it would wear on her she might not have married me. That she stood by

that decision after the realities of the situation were forced on both of us means more to me than anything else she could ever do does. It also adds another dimension to the guilt that plagues me. That guilt erodes my composure now, driving my face away from hers, away from her kiss. I can feel her hurt, it's a current running from her body to mine; a current that doesn't break when I pull away and walk towards the door.

She won't drive me to the departure station. We found out the first time that it only makes things harder. Jarez waits for me outside, his girlfriend driving their shared sportscar, roof reclined to enjoy the mocking sun.

"It's reminding you that you have a reason to come home," Maria's voice calls past the tears staining her features.

"What?" I ask.

"The sun, it's always out when you leave to remind you that you have a reason to come home." I want to tell her that she's my reason to come home, the only reason I need to make sure I'll be okay. The guilt traps the words in my throat, choking me. If I try to speak I'll break. Jarez's girlfriend honks their car horn. I can see out the door, left open to invite the warm air into our home, that Jarez puts a hand on her shoulder, shaking his head at her impatience. I can't break now. I turn back to Maria, cupping her face in my hand and taking in her face. The blonde curls already back in her mouth, the makeup she got up early to put on to see me off already smearing from the corners of her eyes, the nose that's sniffing to hold back moisture, and the gentleness in her eyes that's somehow been preserved even after so much time in proximity to me. My hand falls away. I retreat from our home.

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How long have I been in the black? Two hours? Three? It's impossible to tell so removed from reality. It's like being locked in a sensory deprivation tank. Friends from highschool always wondered what it would be like to be in one, and I did too with the idle curiosity of an unapplied student. Now I think I have a pretty good idea. I don't understand how anyone could enjoy it. I suppose even in one of those tanks people have more freedom than I do now. At least they can scratch their goddamn nose.

Sometime later I'm still in the process of trying to turn my head enough to rub the offending itch against the stiff fabric of the pillow case. I'm so involved in my task that I don't hear the approaching individual until there's a snicker from the direction I've marked as the doorway.

"Jacobs," I say, taking my time with his name, "If there is a video of this going around the platoon when I get out of this bed you're going to be cleaning the latrines for the rest of your enlistment." My statement is followed by the distinct shuffling noise characteristic of someone putting a small object into their pocket in a hurry.

"I'm offended, Sarge, I would never partake in any activity that could undermine the authority of my senior enlisted." If politicians lied like Jacobs, only saints would be elected.

"Besides," Jacobs continues, "With incentive to keep you tied down like that, I might not do what I came here to and let you up." I'm not sure how much of my face is visible beneath the dressings over my eyes, but apparently it's enough for Jacobs to see how desperate I am to be free, because he doesn't waste any more time teasing me before he springs the clasps on whatever is holding my limbs in place. I appreciate the uncharacteristic expediency on his part, not wasting any time to swing myself into a sitting position, dangling my legs off the bed. The rapid movement proves to be a mistake as my joints protest the sudden bending after so long

kept almost straight, and the change in pressure to my head would have made my vision swim if I could have seen anything. Instead, I just get violently nauseous and have to swallow the bile that does its level best to erupt from my mouth. I can hear Jacobs retreating from where he had been positioned in front of me.

“Easy there, Sarge, you’ve been in that bed over two days now.”

“Two days?” I ask, bent almost double from my sitting position in an attempt to quell the imminent threat of vomit. There’s no way I had been out that long.

“Actually, three as of about twenty mikes ago.”

“Three? Christ. What’s the status of the rest of the squad?” The worst of the nausea is past, and taking deep breaths through my nose I’m able to right my stooped posture in relative confidence that I’m not about to be sick all over myself. There’s the soft shuffle of Jacobs’ feet as he approaches me again.

“You can come see for yourself. Docs said the bandages could come off your head now.” It takes a nurse several minutes to unwind the dressings which blind me. Aside from the significant quantity of the material mummifying my cranium, I found out the hard way that pulling it off with indiscriminate force was . . . less than comfortable. That discomfort barely registered when the nurse “unplugged” me, as she put it, from the catheter tube that had been installed in me while I was unconscious. Jacobs stepped out of the room for that one, claiming not to need more nightmares.

“Before you open your eyes, one of the docs said you might want these while you readjust to the light.” Jacobs takes my wrist and presses what feels like a pair of protective tactical glasses into my hand. I don the eye-pro and crack my lids open for the first time in seventy-two hours. Even with the shade from the dark lenses, the harsh fluorescent light that

occupies all government buildings lances through my eyes, conducting blitzkrieg on my optic nerve and leaving me with a devastating headache. I'm almost sick again, but manage to keep control of my faculties enough to make vague articulating gestures towards the ceiling which Jacobs correctly interprets and turns off the lights in the room.

“Sorry about that, should have turned those off before unwrapping you,” he says, and he means it. Jacobs is a perpetual joker, but he's always got our backs. I still fully expect to be hearing snickers about the video of me trying to scratch my nose for the rest of my enlistment, but it isn't the kind of image that will undermine my authority in the squad, or even the platoon. The junior enlisted need to be able to laugh about their seniors and the officers—as long as they know to follow orders and show respect when it counts.

A few more deep breaths and the worst of the headache is behind me. I can function with the low-level throbbing that remains behind my eyes. I've spent too long laid up as it is, time to get back into it. I shove myself to my feet, not quite as fast as I would have liked, or with the firmness I was aiming for, but I'm up and standing on my own. Jacobs looks ready to catch me as I take my first cautious steps, reengaging my muscles after their extended stasis. A few wobbly steps and I'm moving, waving off Jacobs' hovering, but signaling him to guide me to our brothers. He does so, walking beside me through taciturn hallways.

It's disconcerting to have my vision back after hours in the dark spent wondering what my surroundings were like. I had been picturing an amalgamation of all the hospitals I had seen before, with their dated and mass-produced wall art, sporadic pops of color in their tile flooring, and harried looking staff in various colors of scrubs signally their position and authority to the other workers. It turns out I was giving too much atmosphere to the building I've been kept in during my recovery. There is no wall art, the tile is a uniform white, spotless from constant

cleanings, and we only pass three staff members during our trip out of the building: one front desk clerk, wearing plain white scrubs, and two guards in combat uniform, cradling unfamiliar rifles in their arms, both maintaining strict no-nonsense expressions. One is stationed inside the doors and scans us as we exit the building while the other is outside the paneled glass doors of the facility, conducting dutiful surveillance of surroundings I can't yet see from the hallway. Jacobs and I have just finished traversing.

It's odd to have security stationed facing into the building. I can't imagine there are many patients who would be a flight risk on a military base. It gives me the uneasy feeling that I have landed in an atypical situation. Atypical is complicated. Atypical is how people get lost in the forests of this fucking country. Jacobs picks up on my tension in the way only people who have routine experience with near-death together can, but also as someone who knows me in that way, Jacobs doesn't react. The two of us make our way out the doors, offering curt, unreturned nods to both security personnel as we do. One of them falls into step behind us.

My unease does not abate with the revealing of the scenery outside. The trees aren't the same as the ones near the base we left prior to getting hit. It takes time to develop a sense for the forests here, but I've had that time, and these trees feel older. Slightly broader, slightly taller, less light filters between their canopies. Even from the building I've just exited, hundreds of feet from the treeline that the engineers cut back for security purposes while grunts stood guard, trigger fingers itching at the movement of every shadow, I can feel the density of the air beneath those trees. My unease transforms into the eerie sense of foreboding I've heard veteran combat troops claim they get before an ambush.

The buildings in the base itself are low profile, gray, quikrete construction jobs that can be found on most bases in the forests. The only remarkable facet of the bunker-like facilities here

is their sparsity. I count a mere handful that surround the one which we just walked out of, and the perimeter fence is only a few hundred feet between sides, though with a disproportionate population of patrols that never cease their rotation along the fifteen-foot-high chain links, topped with intimidating spirals of razor wire. At regular intervals defensive cover has been erected, behind which more soldiers occupy sentry positions in two man teams, a tripod-mounted heavy weapon resting between each pair. Given the rarity and typical strength of base attacks in the last year of our campaign here, this base is maintaining a ridiculous safety margin where security is concerned. Despite the outward orientation of all the firepower I can see, and the firepower I'm ever more certain I can't see, I find myself wishing I were back in a vehicle with my squad, Ricky manhandling his turret toward anything that dares to so much as cross his mind as a potential threat.

Jacobs takes us across the hard-packed earth, painstakingly derooted as all long-term bases in the forest must be, and to one of the buildings that resembles a longhouse. No guards are stationed at the entrance to this building, though the one who has escorted us from the medical building to this one takes up a position outside, leaving us to enter on our own. After Jacobs opens the door it's clear none are needed. The inside is lined with bunks, half of which are occupied by the same kind of no-nonsense soldiers that were stationed outside the medical facility we just vacated. I can feel Jacobs bristling at their presence, and it causes my own hackles to rise. Normally the inside of a barracks is jocular in the absence of a commanding officer: you might get the occasional soldier with a stick up his ass and a hard on for order, but even they break down and find their place in the hierarchy of military humor eventually. To have silence in a half-full barracks is almost unheard of.

The silence doesn't last. From the back of the single room making up the structure's length, a recognizable voice shatters the severity of the atmosphere:

"Yo, it's Sergeant, get the fuck up boys." Ricky is dragging Havcoff out of the top bunk by his bare foot. Jarez is already up, lacing his boots with the ease of long practice, so quick about it that as soon as I've noticed it, he's done and standing at something resembling parade rest. He knows it's an unnecessary gesture with me, but in the years I've known him I haven't managed to break him out of the habit. Despite this, even Jarez looks uneasy at the rigidity the other soldiers in the barracks comport themselves with. As soon as Ricky's voice cracked the silence of the room, every one of them was alert, the sleeping ones suddenly awake, suddenly upright, suddenly staring both at the door, where Jacobs and I have just entered from, and at the back of the barracks, where the noise came from. The split between the stairs has an uncanny evenness to it, one half the soldiers looking one way, the other half at the open access to the room. It's only for a moment though. Once the lack of threat is verified every one of them resumes their previous position, those who had been sleeping are back in their bunks, eyes shut, unresponsive to the noise of myself and my men as we reunite in the relative privacy of the barracks' back corner.

"Good to see you up, Sarge," Ricky says, voice jovial. His eyes aren't though. They have the hunted look a prey animal gets when a branch snaps in the forest, or when it hears the howling of a dog. It's the same look he has every time we're out of a safety perimeter in the forest. Skin tight in the corners, crinkling his eyes almost like smile lines. Almost.

"Glad to be up and about, Specialist, what's the status of the squad?"

“We’re all that’s here, the rest have been sent back to base.” Before I reply, Ricky moves his head a near imperceptible degree to the side, so slight it could have been an accident. He’s telling me not to question why we’ve been separated from the rest of the platoon.

“Well,” he continues, “Us and Pfc. Pickmin from team bravo, but she’s in another area right now.”

“Pickmin? Why is she here without bravo?” Ricky’s body language isn’t telling me *not* to question Pickmin’s presence the way he warned me off from asking about our separation as a whole. If it’s a matter of subtlety it would be stranger for me not to ask about Pickmin’s isolation.

“She was kept back for more medical, guess they didn’t want to wait to get the others back to where they’re needed.” Before I can follow up with more questions, Havcoff lets out a small yelp.

“You stepped on my toe, you jackass,” he says to Jacobs. He says it loudly, drawing attention from the awake members of the base’s personnel who are in the room.

“It’s what you get for being barefoot where people are walking, *Half-calf*,” Jacobs fires back, more heated than I expect from the good-humored joker of our squad.

“Not even an apology then?” Havcoff says, stepping up to Jacobs, faces only inches apart. I shift my weight, starting to move between them, but before I can, Jarez is there, interjecting.

“Let it go man, you’re standing around in the walkway barefoot,” he has a hand on Havcoff’s chest, pressing him back, but Havcoff isn’t budging. Instead, Havcoff’s ire redirects to Jarez.

“Get your hand off me.” His voice is still louder, and it’s rousing the sleeping men in the barracks who had only just drifted off again after Jacobs and I woke them with our entrance. I start to step forward again until I catch the look in Ricky’s eye telling me to stay. The three other members of our fireteam continue arguing, voices rising and shoving each other. No one in the room has moved to intercede, but all eyes are on them now. More words are exchanged, then Ricky starts to move forward, and I take it as my cue to do the same. Jarez steps back from the argument when he sees us coming, but Ricky and I each have to place ourselves between the other two, gripping their shoulders to pry them apart. My men have never broken discipline this way, never needed more than a word to get them back in line, but the purpose is clear when Havcoff, whose head is pushed next to mine as he leans after Jacobs, whispers to me even as Jacobs is berating him at the maximum volume he’s able to without crossing the boundary to prompting the other soldiers to take action, “Base not on any maps, being watched.” It’s enough to confirm the suspicions raised by my existing discomfort: wherever we are, Big Army isn’t with us.



## Chapter II: Down, Down, To Goblin Town

Only moments after things have calmed down there's a soft beeping behind me. Turning around I see a touchscreen console embedded in the wall between two bunks. One of the soldiers who had been sleeping is already on his feet in front of the screen before I've finished turning. He glances at whatever is written on the screen, turns towards me and speaks.

“Sergeant Colonel Taksa has ordered you to meet him, come with me.” His tone is clipped, almost rude, considering the specialist rank insignia on his shoulder and the sergeant's insignia on mine, even if he is passing along orders from a colonel. The set of his shoulders is aggressive, his body canted at a slight angle to me as though readying to drop into a fighting stance. The man looks like he expects me to resist and he's getting ready to force the issue.

“Absolutely, *Specialist*,” I say, adding emphasis to his rank. He doesn't start walking until I've walked ahead of him, then he takes up a position slightly to my back right, just a step behind. I see the looks of unease my men wear when I walk out, their discomfort at being separated again so soon after our reunion palpable, but I can't refuse orders based on the suspicious circumstances and my gut feeling alone. Not even when that feeling is shared by my whole team, a team that has spent collective years walking the woods, as it's come to be known by soldiers.

When we reach the exit of the barracks structure, I look back at the specialist leading me, his name tape says “Green.”

“Lead the way, Spc. Green.” I try for some levity in my voice, but it falls flat in the barren expanse of hard-packed earth in the center of this mysterious base. Somehow, rather than merely relieving the oppressiveness that is so common in the forest with the trees towering on all

sides, this cleared-out space with its plain quikrete structures and severe inhabitants feels barren, in spite of the vibrance of the flora just a few hundred feet away.

Spc. Green does not lead the way. He makes a mute gesture to the smallest of the several structures comprising the base and waits until I start walking, always just behind me. I'm relieved when we reach the building and, rather than trailing in after me, Spc. Green assumes a position of attention adjacent the building's security personnel, who, unsurprisingly, bears an identical demeanor to every other soldier I've laid eyes on since regaining consciousness except my own team.

The diminutive appearance of this structure's exterior was misleading, as I am greeted with a downward staircase as soon as I pass through the portal to the outside. I can't think of the entrance as a door. Rather than a traditional, cheap, swinging door that most base structures utilize to cut down on costs, this one has a solid inch of metal that retracts into the wall as I approach, with no visible means of opening it at hand on either the exterior or the interior of the building. On closer inspection the metal seems very similar to the armor plating used to protect our tanks.

*Not that our tanks get much use in this fucking place*, I think. The forest's dampness, coupled with the soft earth that makes up its floor, the product of millenia of decomposing trees and underbrush, make for an excellent place to bring a seventy ton death machine if you want it to sink several feet into the earth. That, on its own would be a fixable issue, except that one also must account for the prevalence of trees, which are in many places too close together to bring a tank through, but, more crucially, offer excellent places for guerillas to hide and ambush from if they are looking to target the relatively soft armor on top of our tanks, while simultaneously keeping themselves too high for the main cannon of said tank to blow away them, their cover,

and any ambition they may have ever felt for any further material existence on this plane of reality again. All of this being known, of course the brass continued to ship us tanks with frustrating regularity for the first year of our presence here, regardless of how many were destroyed and how many tank crews we lost.

The building inside the door is austere, naked metal staircase leading down, bare quikrete walls that I suspect are lined with armor similar to the doors, harsh overhead lighting, and not a living soul in sight until I've made my way down the staircase, along a hallway that made two right turns in quick succession, and through another door identical to the first that also seems to be operated by mysterious forces outside the realm of mortal kin.

If there is any doubt left in my mind that I, and my team, have found ourselves in spooksville, the short distance I travel inside this building kills it. Passing through the next door reveals another hallway, this one lined with doors to either side. I can see that one of them is ajar at the far end of the hallway. Lacking anything else in the way of indication and figuring that in such an orderly atmosphere doors were not left open by incident, I make my way towards it. In the silence of the building's hallway my combat boots clunk with disconcerting emphasis.

"Come in, Sergeant," Colonel Taksa's voice intones before I even reach the door. I suppose there isn't a lot of foot traffic in this subterranean admin bunker. I enter the doorway, which is a normal, cheap, wood-composite affair this time. If an explosion breaches the first two armor doors I guess a third one would just ensure the colonel was buried in his office and died that way.

"Please close the door behind you," he says. I do so, before turning to the man and offering a salute. Up to this point, Colonel Taksa had just been a voice in the black to me. It's bizarrely disconcerting to be forced to reconcile his face with the voice I heard in my semi-lucid

state. He's shorter than I expected, though it's hard to judge accurately while he's sitting behind his desk. Dark stubble covers his head, putting a cap on the fair skin of his face. Deep lines crag his features, though I'm not sure if they're from age, a lifetime of stress, or a combination of the two.

"Sir, reporting as ordered," I say.

"Yes, at ease. Relax and have a seat, Sergeant." He motions to a straight-backed folding chair set up opposite him at his desk. I glance around his office as I take the proffered seat, it's as austere as the rest of the base environment. Not that most bases in the forest are winning interior decorating contests, but higher-ups usually make some effort to personalize their offices. Pictures of family, graduation photos from officer training, motivational people from history. Something to indicate what kind of officer they are. Colonel Taksa has nothing. The walls are a nondescript beige, containing all the personality of unsweetened oats. Two old-fashioned filing cabinets occupy a back corner of the office, flanking the colonel's right side. His desk is a minimal gray metal construct that looks like it could be dismantled and stored in little enough room that it could fit inside one of its own drawers. I can't see the colonel's chair behind him, but from the spartan demeanor of the room and the man himself it would not surprise me to learn that it was identical to the one I'm sitting in. The colonel himself has not looked up from a tablet in his hands, and makes no indication that he will for several minutes. I notice the tablet is not wireless, but has a cord trailing down the side of the desk and into the floor adjacent one of its legs. Familiar as I am with the uniformity of military hardware, I know that it's not a charging cable. Come to think of it, the soldier in the barracks who brought me here had checked a wall monitor for orders. Why is nobody at this base using wireless comms?

“Thank you for coming in,” Colonel Taksa says, breaking me from my musing reverie. “You got here faster than I expected, I thought you might need a few more minutes with your men.” I don’t even get to open my mouth to reply before the colonel continues.

“Doubtless by now you’ve noticed a number of things off about your surroundings, and I can’t offer you explanations far beyond what you already should have deduced. This is not a regular base, we are not regular soldiers, and you are not supposed to be here. We got as many of your platoon out as quickly as we could, but we still need you and your squad.” He pauses and I take it as my cue to show that I’m keeping up.

“Need us for what, sir?” I supply. He’ll continue anyway, but an attentive audience is often appreciated by brass.

“The package your platoon was delivering was supposed to end up here, eventually, though that’s not where you were taking it.” He stops again, as though that’s supposed to explain everything.

“I’m sorry sir, but I’m not following. The captain had the package while we were in transit.” He had, hadn’t he? Everything is so muddled and my head throbs again, protesting its use after its abuse. The look the colonel is giving me does nothing to assuage my feelings of uncertainty.

“We debriefed your squad, as well as the surviving members of the rest of your platoon. According to the accumulated accounts, you’re the only individual we can’t account for for any significant amount of time that made it out of the ambush, and you were last seen far ahead of your vehicle close to vehicles one and two where the package was. Medical said you might have some memory loss, hopefully temporary. We need that package, Sergeant, so why don’t you tell me what you can remember.” It’s not a request. I push myself back into the vehicle with my

squad, push past the worsening pain in my head, into the murky obscurity that's fogging my memory.

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"I'm telling you, Jar, the crawlers on these trees could take our weight if we wind 'em up enough," Jacobs says to Jarez in the front of the vehicle.

"No way, man, maybe Havcoff's, but not your fat ass, and definitely not thunder-thighs up there on the gun." Ricky might have taken offense to that comment if he could hear it, but between the wind and the grinding of the Humvee's knobby tires through the muck of the shit road we're following, he might as well not be present at all.

"It's basic engineering, a lot of weak things wound together make a strong thing, like how string makes rope," Jacobs continues like he hasn't heard Jarez. "We just get a bunch of 'em twisted up together and we'll be able to go right over that water like we're on a back river tire-swing back home."

"Home for you, you country hick. The only swinging I did was with my girl on the weekends." Jarez gesticulates like he's miming a dance. Without looking away from his window, Havcoff chimes in from the seat next to me in the back: "Jar, whatever you think that means, never say it again."

"What do you mean what I think it means—" Jarez trails off as he's realizing what he said, Jacobs howls, laughing harder than I've heard a man laugh in months, but never taking his eyes off of the area in front of the vehicle.

"Shut up, man," Jarez shoots at him. "Where did you learn anything 'bout 'basic engineering' anyway."

“I am college educated, unlike you high school enlisters,” Jacobs retorts. “No offense, Sarge,” he adds.

“I might be offended,” I say, “if I wasn’t aware that you dropped out of college after two months.”

“That’s two months more higher education than any of you boys have under your belts,” Jacobs replies.

“Don’t talk about what’s under your belt,” Havcoff says, “Not now that we know what Jarez likes to do with his girl on the weekends.” Jarez unclasps his helmet and places it in his lap so that he can bury his face in it, but I can see the white flash of his teeth through the crook of his elbow.

The banter lulls, Havcoff nudges my arm.

“Hey, Sarge, how long’s Ricky been up there, I haven’t seen him hydrate since we left base.”

“Too long,” I say, reaching forward and tapping Ricky’s bulging quadriceps with my gloved knuckles. Two taps, our signal for non-emergency. The big man lowers himself into the cab of the rolling vehicle and looks at me, shemagh pulled up over his nose, tactical eye-pro covering most of what’s between that and his helmet. I’m reminded how terrifying we are when people don’t know us. That’s the point though; terrorize the enemy, give confidence to our allies.

“Drink,” I say simply. He nods once, and pulls the fabric covering his face down to his chin, revealing the out-of-regulation scruff that’s grown in on his face. Leadership won’t care, not here anyway. Probably give some POG paper-pusher back home an aneurism. I hand him one of the spare canteens we keep full in the humvee rather than making him deal with

unfastening his own from its place on his carrier. A few swallows later he hands it back and resumes his place at our turret.

“How much farther we got?” Jacobs asks.

“Until they say we’re there,” I reply. “They were tight-lipped about this one, Lt. and that new captain is the only one who seems to know exactly where we’re going.”

“This Cpt. Walden is off,” Jarez rejoins the conversation, having removed his face from his helmet. “Dude just comes in, out of nowhere, and has us heading out to who knows where with a half-assed hooah-ah speech and no briefing.”

“Ours not to reason why, ours but to do and die,” Jacobs offers.

“Oh lord, here he goes with his poetry,” Jarez says.

“Actually that *was* Lord Tennyson, as it happens. Funny how cultured you get when you go to college.”

Jarez places his face back in his helmet, apparently the smell of accumulated sweat and grime caked to the inside is preferable to Jacobs’ smug demeanor. For his part, Jacobs’ face is a picture of modesty and innocence.

“Seriously, though,” Havcoff says, “We’ve gotta be five hours out by now, and we didn’t exactly start in friendly territory. Where the fuck are we going?”

“Wherever we need to, same as always,” I say. The terrain outside the vehicle hasn’t changed since we left base. Massive trees pack the area, just like they do everywhere on this continent. I don’t know how the population puts up with it, never being able to see more than a hundred feet in any direction if they leave their cities before the ridiculous girth of the trunks meshes with the underbrush, some of which could be considered trees in their own right anywhere else in the world, to form an indistinct visual clutter that’s impenetrable to everything



but infrared scanners. It makes me feel cramped, claustrophobic. No matter how much I stretch I still feel like I'm stooping beneath the canopy that starts a hundred feet above my head and ends somewhere much further up than that.

"We're coming up on another bend in the road, we're going to lose sight of first platoon for a moment here," Jacob's reports, all business now. None of us like having visual contact broken with our comrades, it makes it too easy for things to go sideways on us if there's an ambush. It doesn't help that the maps we have are poor representations of the reality of the area. The forest overtakes roads with a creeping vengeance, so half the time the crappy dirt-mud lanes we think we're going to find are barely discernible in the deep woods where our patrols go in search of the enemy. To make matters worse, the canopy makes aerial surveillance a tenuous prospect at best, but more often a waste of time entirely.

We pass a tense several minutes as we approach the bend Jacobs warned us about. The forest has a relatively gentle grade across the majority of its land, but because of all the roots in the ground it's often easier to go around the few steep embankments than it is to terraform them to make a straight road. We watch our sectors in professional silence as ahead of us the other vehicles in our convoy slip beyond the reach of our view one by one, disappearing around the wooded hillock that interrupts the road. Finally it's our turn, and we lose visual on the vehicles behind us as well, preferring to maintain enough distance that a lucky explosive device can't take out multiple fireteams' humvees rather than bunching up to see each other. Nobody says a word, but my men aren't green, they don't make rookie mistakes like preemptively putting their fingers on their triggers, nothing that could lead to accidental injury of a friendly.

“Close right, 8 o’clock,” Jarez barks from the front. His helmet, back on already, points out his window. The window is up so he can’t level his carbine, but he’s not surveilling so that he can shoot.

Ricky’s body shifts as he manhandles the big gun mounted to our Humvee’s roof in the indicated direction. I see a shift in the bushes where Jarez is looking just before the grinding tear of Ricky’s weapon shatters the silence, and the underbrush I’m looking at is torn apart in a spray of atomized foliage and red mist. Ricky ceases fire, the short burst lasted maybe a second or two, but it was enough to obliterate the area around his target zone. Tattered leaves and twigs hang limp from their branches, and a tree has lost a substantial amount of its bark. Calls for reports ring out from our radio. The small deer that is native to this part of the forest, and that had been secluded in the brush, is just a collection of limbs and a head, attached to a pulverised body by what may generously be called skin.

“All clear,” I radio to the other units. “Just a deer in the bushes.”

“Damn, Ricky,” Jacobs calls up, loud enough for our gunner to hear over the sounds of the vehicle and his own hearing protection. “Why’d you have to blow it away like that, could have added it to chow if you’d left enough.” Ricky manages to kick his seat without having to descend into the cab.

It takes time for the adrenaline that comes with the expectation of impending combat to die down, and it always leaves me feeling drained afterwards. It’s actually worse without the followthrough of getting shot at, because I don’t feel like I have an excuse to be tired no matter how many times the science gets explained to me. I’m still riding the dregs of the high when the last vehicle finishes its traversal around the hill and we can all see each other again.

The next twenty minutes of travel time are uneventful, but after that point things start getting hazy again. It's not like when I was trying to remember, sightless and confined to my medical bunk, where the outside of the vehicle was murky. Instead the thread of my memory just seems to unravel in the tedium of the ride. The absence of any specific stand-out memories gives me no waypoint to locate the more procedural time in between them.

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"That's as far as I can get, Sir," I say by way of apology to Colonel Taksa, who sat through my recounting without a single expression flickering through the wrinkles that flank his brown eyes.

"Well, based on what your squads and platoons reports said, you remember almost everything that happened before the ambush. Has anything more been coming back to you since we started talking about it?"

"Yes, Sir, when I first came to last night I could only remember what was happening in the vehicle, and not for that long." The colonel looks pensive. After a moment of contemplation on his part, and resisting the urge to wince at my throbbing head on mine, he responds, "Do you think it would be helpful for you to return to the ambush location?"

"Sir?" I say, nonplussed. He wants me to go *back* to a combat zone with head trauma? I'd be a potential liability to whatever team he sent me with.

"I'm not going to sugarcoat this, Sergeant, we need that package secure. If there is a one percent chance that this will help, I'll do it. So, are you squared away?" There is only ever one response to that question when it's coupled with the look he's giving me.

"Yes, Sir, squared away, Sir," I say.

### Chapter III: If a Tree Falls in the Forest...

The colonel doesn't just send me out with a team of his men, but rather sends my whole fireteam out as well. If I'd thought it would have done any good to object I would have, but I get the sense that this man is the no-nonsense type, and once his mind is made up there isn't going to be any changing it. All my protesting would have done is annoy him, so I lock it up, suck it up, and tell my team to do the same. Not that they complain—none of them want to be separated from me or each other again.

We don't have any of our own gear, I hadn't even thought to ask after mine after waking up, but apparently the personnel here "collected" it from us when we were brought in. For security reasons. They've re-kitted us with gear from their armory. As is the army way, it's the same as the gear from the armory back at our base. Also as is the army way, their gear is in better condition than our gear, so none of us are complaining. Except Jacobs, who had a particular attachment to his sidearm and is irate about its confiscation.

"What about Pickmin?" Havcoff asks me as we're getting ready to head out. My hands slips on the magazine I'm loading into my carrier, but I manage to catch it before the others notice.

"I asked the colonel about her before I left his office," I reply to Havcoff. "He said she isn't good to move yet." I finish loading the pockets of my carrying system with spare magazines for my replacement carbine. This one has different sights than its predecessor, and there hasn't been time to do more than a cursory zeroing of the reticle so I can only hope I won't need to be putting pins in anything at three-hundred yards. Then again, I've never made contact with an enemy beyond one-fifty in the forest, and that was only because that guy was down an

uncommonly straight length of road, coming at us in a beat-up old truck. Not the greenest leaf on the tree, that guy.

“We’ve got to at least check on her, Sarge. They barely let Jacobs in to see you the last few days, none of us have laid eyes on Pickmin since we got here.” Havcoff’s objections wither under the sergeant’s glare that I fix him with. It’s a trick they teach us non-coms: how to shut the junior enlisted up. I know Havcoff has a soft-spot for Pickmin, and the sergeant part of my brain tells me I should address it. Inter-platoon romance is verboten under any circumstances, let alone battlefield conditions. I don’t know how to look Havcoff in the eye and talk about it though. Ricky bumps Havcoff’s arm with his own, and motions to our surroundings with the hand concealed from the spook-soldiers surrounding us. Bless the big man for getting it, and saving me. I look away from the two and finish checking my weapon for the third time, but find Jacobs’ eyes locked on mine instead, his face inscrutable. He lets the look linger for an uncomfortable moment before rechecking his own weapon, the slide on it racking closed with a crisp snap.

We’re rolling no more than five minutes later. They separate my team amongst the four vehicles they’re sending out. Fewer men than the last time my team and I left a base, but apparently we’re much closer to the ambush location. We’d have to be considering that these guys managed to save our asses the first time around. Four vehicles, two squads of the spooks, and my beat-up team split up amongst them. Jacobs and Jarez get put together, Havcoff, Ricky, and I all get placed alone with teams of these strangers. None of them talk, and I hope Jacobs has the good sense to keep his mouth shut for the ride so they don’t shut it for him. They’re probably too professional to let it get to them. Probably. *Jarez, please shut him up*, I think.

My own ride is wordless. Each soldier monitoring the view outside their respective window, a gunner on top manning the vehicle’s turret, and me strapped in the middle of the back

seat like the least favorite child on a family vacation. I make the best of it and rest my eyes, trying to force the throbbing in my head to recede. It's only the memories surrounding the ambush that seem to trigger the pain, looking back further is fine. I think about Maria, safe back in our home, on a base in Vicksville. It was just after noon when we left base, so it must be around seven in the morning for her. She'll be up and bustling around the kitchen making breakfast, maybe doing yoga to limber up before she has to go sit in her office all day. An image of her blonde hair falling out of a bun to wrap around her face and stick in the corner of her mouth the way they usually do flashes across my closed eyelids. I can smell the floral shampoo she prefers. I open my eyes. The vehicle is slowing, the smell of flowers fades.

"Sergeant," the man riding shotgun says, I can't see his name tag and don't remember his face. "We'll secure the area, wait in the vehicle until we're done." I *can* see his rank insignia on his shoulder, and he's a sergeant like me. I don't outrank him, but this is his team and his show so I nod my affirmation. Better to let these strangers risk their lives than my men. The romantic part of my mind criticizes me for disregarding the lives of fellow soldiers, but spooks aren't the same as the rest of us, and these boys are spooks to their core. One of the two I've been rubbing shoulders with in the back seat gives me a deliberate nudge and a wink as he steps out. I almost think I see a cocky grin for a second before he's gone. Maybe not all of them are off. Must be the new guy.

For all my discomfort in their presence, they're damn good at what they do. They have a perimeter established faster than any team I've ever worked with, vehicles parked in as much cover as one can reasonably expect to find for a several-ton armored vehicle, and I notice that two of the vehicles, which I couldn't get a good look at when we were hurrying to get out here, don't have the mounted heavy machine guns that are standard, but rather have grenade launchers

affixed to their turrets. It's a lot more bang than we usually roll around with for patrols. At least the colonel isn't fucking around with security while we're out here.

“Sergeant, perimeter is secure.” The sergeant who was riding shotgun reappears at the side of the Humvee I sit in. I enact a graceless butt shuffle to reach the edge of the seat from my starting point in the middle and unfold myself from the vehicle. I can't help but survey the perimeter established by the spooks. It's a wide perimeter, too wide for only two squads. Two-man teams are stationed in cover around an area the size of a baseball field. I can't even see a few of the teams, but assume their position based off of the teams I *do* see. I'm about to comment when I note the equipment set up by the nearest pair. It's the new infrared scanning gear that research and development just finished. It's not supposed to be in circulation for at least another year—then again, spooks don't exactly count as “in circulation.” Supposedly the new tech is ultra sensitive, enough so that it'll pick up signatures even in the densest part of the forest from two-hundred feet. Doesn't sound impressive unless you've seen just how difficult it is to pick out a target at that range in all this underbrush. You can hear them, sure, might even catch a glimpse of their lights if it's dark enough to need them—which is most of the time given how much light the canopy denies the forest floor—but to actually find a line-of-sight to get a bead on whatever it is you've glimpsed and hope they aren't moving at anything more than a dead stop? Almost never happens past that unseeable distance of these infrared setups. The down-side to them is that they don't work real well when they're moving. It makes any heat signatures they pick up blur, creating smears across the screen. For static defense like this, though, they'll be life-savers. Feelings of bitterness at the military's inability to push distribution of the new tech they have faster rise in my throat. I'd have three breathing friends just from this last deployment if we'd had those. I'm saved from reliving the experience of watching Havcoff's predecessor,

Specialist Timothy Hendricks, die after a guerilla low crawled to within forty feet of our perimeter without being seen, by the sergeant moving on.

“Follow me, Colonel wants me to walk you through what happened as far as reports will take us.”

I do so, finding the feeling of relative security in a known hot-zone disconcerting. My feet still find the clearest patches of floor to step on, avoiding dry twigs that would crackle with hazardous volume, but at least I don't hunch in the way that's become habit when moving through the forest on foot. It would be bad for my team to see me cowering, however sensibly, when the other sergeant is walking upright. Jacobs and the others fall in with us, following suit and trying to look unconcerned. Not Ricky though, all of our heads are on a swivel in spite of the perimeter guards, but his never stops, and he checks our six every few paces, turning a full circle before making use of his long legs to make up the distance. He's hunched, but not even Jacobs is mouthy enough to accuse the big man of cowering.

The sergeant, whose name tag says Boru once I manage to read it, leads us just a few dozen feet to a stuck humvee. I recognize it as the one we left the base in. It's dark forest camouflage is chipped and scraped from dozens of ricochets, the small arms munitions not penetrating the armor, but chewing up the mud that the vehicle's wheels sank into.

“This is where you were when the ambush started,” he says.

“Where are the other vehicles?” I ask.

“The others weren't all stuck, and none like you guys were. They managed to pull free after the fighting stopped except for the lead vehicle that was the initial target. That's just around the bend up there. Scrapped.” He indicates a bend in the road circumventing a particularly dense patch of forest sitting on the top of a small plateau, nine or ten feet off the ground. There is no



incline leading up to it, just a flat cliff face sprouting from the earth to the level of the flat area on top. I will never understand the topography of this place.

“How’d we get stuck?” I’m looking at Jacobs.

“I stopped short when we heard the lead get hit, guess it dug us into the mud. Couldn’t get moving again.” He shrugs. As post-combat analysis goes, it’s as good as I could hope for.

“Alright, Sergeant Boru, walk us through it.” The man does, his stocky frame turning its back to me and talking over his shoulder, not looking to see if we’re following him. From the few glimpses of his features that I’ve gotten, Boru has the slightly pinched features and short, wide, build indicative of the forest’s native population, though globalization has ensured so much diversity that it doesn’t mean he’s any more likely to be from this place than Ricky with his massive body and wide face, or Jacobs with his stringy, farm-boy tough musculature and sharp cheekbones. I wonder how many of the spook soldiers have features that might make the foresters more at ease around them, assuming they know how to act like people and not just the automaton personae I’ve seen so far.

“You got stuck here, which blocked the vehicles behind you from making it forward to assist, but the vehicle ahead continued forward to bring in their turret after a buried explosive took out the lead Humvee and its occupants, including your lieutenant.” He continues, “Captain Walden, in the second vehicle, ordered the rest of you to move forward on foot once the shooting started.”

“Where was the shooting coming from?” I interrupt Boru, and while his voice and posture don’t change, I get the sense he’s annoyed at the inference he wasn’t going to get to that.

“From what reports say, it started from the forest on the right side of the road ahead, opposite that plateau. After the initial explosion they waited for support to close before opening

up on the covering vehicle. Their rounds weren't large enough to punch through your armor, but with humvee one blocking the road there wasn't much room to maneuver the other vehicles to provide cover. In spite of this, two members of your first platoon's bravo team exited their vehicle to check for survivors while the remainder laid down covering fire." His voice tightens on the last note like he disagrees with the call to check the hit vehicle. We're approaching the plateau now, and the road we're following is chewed up the same way it was near our stuck humvee.

Before I can prompt him further, Boru continues, "When the rest of the platoon advanced on foot, insurgents hiding on the plateau opened fire on you, that's where the majority of the casualties came from. Your team got lucky, pulling security while the others leapfrogged forward, you were still by your vehicle when that started so you had cover." There's no judgement in the statement, but the survivor's guilt is obvious in my team. Havcoff, in particular, still new, hasn't finished adjusting to the randomness of survival in the forest yet. His face is the inflexible mask of someone trying very hard not to let others know what they're feeling.

"Alright, how did we end up near the package away from our vehicle?" The captain had it with him in his vehicle." It's frustrating not being able to remember. I feel like the details are there, almost within arms' reach, but they just won't come.

"You had us flank from the side, Sarge." Jarez picks up the thread of events. "You, Jacobs, and I left Havcoff and Ricky to cover the rest of the platoon with the turret. We came in from the side of that ridge and cleared out the opposition up there, but Jacobs took hits to his vest and then we got pinned by the *termites* from somewhere in the woods. Couldn't move an inch, and we lost you in it." He stops there, and I don't chastise him for using the slur. There is a time and a place for discipline, and this isn't it.

“How do you know I had the package last then?”

“The survivor from the second vehicle says you appeared out of nowhere, grabbed it, and took off.” Boru uses the same neutral tone, but it’s clear from his phrasing that not everyone thinks I’m a hero for this. Might explain some of the spooks’ behavior.

“Anything coming back to you yet?” The spook sergeant’s expression is deadpan. No hint of the judgement I know he’s feeling.

“No,” I reply. “Jacobs, Jarez, walk me through the route we took.” They lead the way off towards the security perimeter.

“We haven’t cleared that way,” Sergeant Boru objects.

“It’ll be a bigger risk taking the time to clear all that dense brush off the road than it will just be to go through it,” I say. He mulls this over, doing the cold equations in his head, but only for a moment—not one to waste time when it’s dangerous to do so. He takes point, tapping one of the soldiers holding security on the way out and saying, “Five going out,” before continuing forward. My team and I follow suit, tapping the security guard so he has a count of how many bodies are out of the perimeter. I hear the soft murmur of the soldier reporting the exodus into his comms, making sure we don’t get any friendly fire out of confusion.

Crossing the perimeter turns Sergeant Boru into a different person, as soon as we’re out he’s bent low, walking in more absolute silence than any forest veteran I’ve ever served with, and it’s not slowing him down at all. He motions for Jarez to lead the way, and Jarez complies. Rather than risk the noise of talking me through events, the tacit decision is made to relive them in silence. If anything, the added threat of being outside our secured area will add to the verisimilitude of the reenactment. For better or worse, a low-level adrenaline buzz spikes my

veins, making the sweat that's almost always on my body in this humid woods turn cold and my skin prickle.

The first time I stepped off of an uncomfortable flight in a cargo plane and into this place, the three-tour sergeant next to me looked over and told me that every day out here, no matter what we're doing, even if we just sit on base and jerk ourselves off all day, we're hunted. We're hunted, but we're not *prey*. As a young and dumb private I thought he was just trying to yank my chain, fuck with the green recruit's head. We're hunters, that's what they trained us for, to hunt the enemy. I got it the first time we took fire. Came out of nowhere and ate up the guy in front of me and the tree behind him. Insurgent fuck who did it wasn't even twenty feet away, sat still as a death in a bush waiting for that moment, and even now with three tours of my own out here I've never figured out what made him choose that soldier to hunt instead of me. Doesn't matter. All that matters is this feeling. Being hunted. It's never stronger than in the first steps out of what we think of as safety.

Jarez leads the way, ingrained competence allowing him to stay alert to possible threats while miming out our last trek through this patch of bush for my benefit. Jacobs and Boru flank us, devoting the entirety of their attention to making sure we all live through this risky dumbshow. At one point there is the sharp cracking of a branch off to our left, the side opposite us from where the other spooks have set up their perimeter, and we all freeze. A tense few seconds pass, and when nothing more comes Boru fades into a copse of eight-foot trees. Whatever lone-wolf crap he's pulling would never fly in a regular platoon, but less than two minutes after he vanishes into the opaque blanket of young conifers he pops back out, gesturing the all clear. We continue on.

Our route is a fast arch through one of the densest portions of the forest I've seen in at least the last three months of various patrols and missions. Even Boru is breathing hard by the time we come up on the only side of the plateau that isn't bordered by the dirt road. This side doesn't have an incline that we can walk up either, but there is a series of rising shelves made up of the dark grey rock that's everywhere on this continent. They look like steps made for someone twice the size of a normal human. We leapfrog up them, two of us holding security while two clamber up to the next level. If there's such a thing as "exposed" in an environment as rife with visual clutter as the forest, that isn't a man made clearing like a road, this is it. Boru stays one shelf beneath us, crouched in another small pine, this one growing at a precarious angle so that it covers half the step he's on. It's not good, but it's the best position he can watch our six from.

Jarez doesn't have to mime out what happened here for me. A hundred or so spent bullet casings are scattered around the top step, all of them the type our carbines use, rather than the older heavier type favored by our enemy. Peaking my head over the lip of the plateau, the evidence of our work is clear. The enemy took up positions of cover from the road, not from their back. It would have been a shooting gallery for us. In the chaos of a gunfight, they probably didn't even realize what was happening until we'd gunned down more than a few of them. I don't feel bad for my enemy, they brought this on themselves by ambushing us, and by not having rear security. That's saying nothing about all the casualties from our side. No, this is just the way things are. Move and countermove. It's not like chess, which is strategic, more like checkers where a single misplaced piece could cost you the bulk of your forces. At least it would be like that if checkers only allowed a half-second per move and every time you took longer than that someone would pull the trigger in a half-loaded revolver aimed at one of your friends. It's still a bad analogy. There isn't a good one.

A soft murmuring behind us lets me know Boru is updating his men on our position. If we proceed onto the plateau we'll be reentering the perimeter in a few dozen feet. I expect us to do just that until Jarez leans in so that he can speak in a whisper.

“This is where we split up, Jacobs and I got pinned behind that outcrop up on the plateau, you took off, vanished over the side that way.” He indicates the drop-off on the opposite side of where our vehicle is stuck. I'm about to suggest they show me the forward vehicle that was hit by the explosive rather than trying to track my previous route now that it's several days cold, but we get interrupted by Boru.

“We've gotta go, just got reports of heavy opposition in the area.”

“How heavy?” I ask.

“Too much for us in a straight fight, that's not what we're here for.” He makes a cutting movement with his hand to indicate that this isn't the time for further discussion, and takes point in guiding us back to the perimeter. He takes us in a straight line rather than the looping path Jarez, Jacobs, and I used to maintain cover during the ambush. We were even closer to the perimeter than I thought so it only takes us a minute to get back, give the security team we left the passcode, and tap our way back into the perimeter. The only reason we couldn't move the perimeter out rather than having to sneak through the bushes was the amount of visual obstruction. The foresters are dangerously accomplished at concealing themselves in such dense foliage, and it could have been catastrophic if one had gotten inside our lines with an explosive, or worse managed to gather intel on what we were doing out here. I don't know what's in the package, but if the spooks are this desperate for it, I'm positive I don't want it in enemy hands.

We're on our way back to base in almost no time flat, Humvee tires spraying mud from the ever-worsening road into air behind each vehicle. Our foray back into the shit doesn't seem

to have yielded any results. My memory remains an indistinct conglomeration of almost-recalled events and images, nothing standing out past what I've already recalled. The frustration of not being able to control my own mind is wearing on me, and I sink into the turmoil of my thoughts, hardly noticing how the bumps and skids of the vehicle over the poor terrain cause my shoulders to jostle with those of the spooks next to me.

Without warning the vehicle veers sharply to the side, bouncing its way up onto a better maintained road. It isn't paved, or particularly good, by any means, but it's hard dirt instead of mud so the skidding subsides after the initial rockiness of our vehicle mounting its new path.

"What's going on?" I call up to Boru where he sits in shotgun again. He's just placing the vehicle comm unit back into its holder.

"Change of plans," he says. "That enemy force I mentioned, it altered course and ran into one of our other teams. They need support."

"You told me we weren't equipped to engage that enemy force."

"Well, now we have about fifteen mikes to get equipped. I'd love to tell you that your team can wait in the car, Sergeant, but I'm gonna need them."

"Use us how you need us"

"Not you," he says. "You're the only one who knows where that package is. You'll be with us up to the point we leave the vehicles, then you *are* staying in the car."

"You can't expect me to send my men out without me."

"You're not sending anyone out, I am, and I will tie you up and put you in the trunk if you step one foot outside this truck," and something in his voice lets me know that's not an idle threat.

## Chapter IV: From Left to Bang

Whatever is going on with the engaged spook patrol, it's happening the better part of a kilometer from where Sergeant Boru calls the vehicles to a halt. Apparently there is a parallel road to the one we're on, and that's where the conflict is. His plan is simple, as most plans made in haste are. We stop the humvees here, he leads his spooks, reinforced by my fireteam, through the forest between the two roads to flank the enemy. His plan isn't to wipe them out, just to draw their attention long enough for the other spooks to disengage and disappear into the forest.

I don't need to ask why he is planning this hit-and-run strategy rather than looking to eliminate the enemy force, I can hear the discharge of heavy weapons from inside the Humvee. Sound doesn't travel well through a kilometer of forest. The same features of the woods that make it so easy to hear movement nearby make it that much more difficult to hear them over a distance. Lots of soft greenery to absorb soundwaves, thousands of tree-trunks. If I'm hearing it this distance away *and* inside an armored Humvee, it's big.

Boru leaves the spook with the cocky smile to guard the vehicles "with" me, though it seems more like he's guarding me as well. It's a borderline tragic lack of security for hundreds of thousands of dollars of military equipment between the four vehicles, but it's apparent that maximizing the success of the hit-and-run distraction attempt is Boru's priority.

Not even two minutes after the vehicles pull to a stop, the spook sergeant has briefed the assembled soldiers, including mine, and they've set off into the trees with speed. With all the weapons discharging where they're going, they won't have to worry about stealth. Each member of my team looks to me for confirmation that they're going with the spooks, and I nod the okay. Havcoff looks nervous, but each and every one of them wants to go help their fellow soldiers.



That, and unlike me they remember what the foresters did to our platoon, the memories of their friends being gunned down still only days old. They're out for payback. I hope they keep their heads and disengage when Boru orders them to. I wouldn't worry about it under normal circumstances, when I or our lieutenant was giving the orders. Even one of our other squad sergeants. Boru isn't part of our clique though, doesn't even really feel like part of the same military. He's a spook, a figment, from a base that doesn't exist, under a command structure we know little about, with objectives we've probably never heard of. High brass has a lot of ways of getting things done, and it's been clear since we found ourselves on the spook base that we've just been the public face of those efforts. So, I catch each of their eyes before they go, hold them with my own for an extra second, will them to know that their priority is getting back in one piece. If it comes down to my guys or some other guys, fuck those other guys.

Then, they're gone. The last camouflaged back disappears from my vision as it dodges around a tree. They've left the majority of their gear in the vehicles, favoring speed over firepower. Didn't even bother setting up the infrared sensors. Who was going to man enough sensors for three-hundred sixty degree coverage here anyway? Me and Private Cocky wouldn't have enough eyes if we both grew a second pair in the backs of our heads.

Private Cocky, places his back against the vehicle I'm in, motioning for me to crack the window. Desperate for a distraction from the thought of my men going into combat without me, I do so.

“What's your name, Sergeant?”

“My name? Can't you read, Private?”

“Your first name.” My instinct is to criticize this soldier for behaving so casually with an NCO, and not devoting himself fully to security. Then I notice the tightness around his eyes and

it occurs to me that I'm not the only one with buddies going into combat without me right now, and he *is* scanning the surroundings, even as I notice this, he's turning, taking in everything around the vehicle. He wasn't left as a token guard for the four Humvees, he was left to guard me.

"It's James. What's yours, soldier?"

"Jeremiah Chokey," he pronounces is like "Cocky." *Cocky's name is actually Chokey? You've gotta be kidding me.*

"So what you're telling me, soldier, is that you're Private Cocky?" He must have heard the joke before, but hearing it in the flat NCO "are you fucking with me" tone of voice that every enlisted knows still makes him laugh. He has the same laugh as Jacobs. Not the laugh itself, but the way he can laugh and still not impede his ability to survey his environment in the slightest. I'm going to have to ask Jacobs to teach me that when we get out of this, before now I thought it was something specific to him, but maybe it *can* be learned.

"Yes, Sergeant, that is correct, Sergeant." He imitates the cadence of a scared recruit, fresh into basic training, and I allow myself the half smile.

"So, Pvt. Chokey, how did you draw the short straw and end up babysitting?"

"Don't see any babies here, Sergeant," he replies, "But if that were to be the case, I'm sure it would be because I am the new guy, and the stick they tried to implant in training only made it halfway up my ass, which has lead me into all sorts of fun and exciting opportunities to adjust my attitude." Guess I was right about him being the new guy—knew he was too human.

"Why do they keep you around then?" I ask, pushing to keep both our minds off the escalating sounds of combat emanating through the trees. Guess Boru and the boys have joined the fun then.

“Because I’m that much better than the rest of them,” he answers, and sounds just a little distracted by the volume of gunfire and the events it betrays.

“Why do you stick around then?” I press him harder. It’s not just out of the goodness of my heart that I’m distracting him from thoughts of his buddies dying, and it’s not that I’m that desperate to forget my own men. He’s the first human being I’ve met from the spook ranks. From what my team’s said, he’s the first they’ve met in the three days they’ve been conscious and living on the spook base too. Hard to believe everything that’s happened today has only been in the span of twelve hours. The sun, hidden behind the treetops as always in this place, will just be starting its final descent beyond the horizon. My watch reads nineteen-hundred twenty-two.

“Because, Sergeant,” he answers after a few seconds, “They’re that much better than everyone else,” and the cool certainty of his answer sends chills down my spine. No matter how many times I remind myself that these men come from the same place I do, that they have families back home like the rest of us, that we play for the same team, I can’t shake the feeling that we aren’t playing the same game.

Our conversation lulls now, and in that lull Chokey’s head snaps around and he brings his rifle to bear on something behind the Humvee. Before I can even look, he’s firing, finger squeezing the trigger in tight hammer bursts. The bang-bang, bang-bang, one-two rhythm trained into every muscle and tendon of the lethal kid.

He’s gotten off three pairs of shots before I finish turning, which coincides with when the group of enemy soldiers behind us manages to start returning fire. I duck down in my seat out of reflex, even though the rounds aren’t aimed at me. A series of thuds ring through the Humvee’s armor, and a crack indicates the rear windglass was struck, but it doesn’t seem like anything

penetrated. Grabbing my carbine I push the door open, but it's shoved closed again before the gap is wide enough for me to slip out.

“Stay,” Pvt. Chokey barks, then the window rolls itself up and all the locks click shut. I'm forced to watch as the private slinks around the side of the vehicle and out of sight. Gambling on the spook's vehicle armor being maintained, and unable to sit and do *nothing* at all, I stick my head above the back of the seats, glancing around outside. Two tangos lie where the private shot them, bleeding out from tight groupings in their upper torsos. I can see two—no, three—more dashing from cover to cover, sending rounds at my humvee. No, not *at* my Humvee, at the last place they saw Pvt. Chokey, but he isn't there anymore. For a frantic few seconds I maintain visual on the enemy, jerking my head down everytime a bullet smacks into the rear windglass that stands between the enemy's weapons and the structural integrity of my skull. The glass gives no indication of yielding beyond a few small cracks. Whatever it's made out of is a cut above the standard issue bullet-resistant stuff.

Suddenly, Chokey is behind them. I wonder how he managed to cover the distance so fast without them seeing him. He guns down first one, then another, drilling them through the back with his carbine. The third one spins, firing blindly, and Chokey's head jerks to the side, he goes down in a ditch on the side of the road, tumbling out of sight.

“No,” I yell, pounding a fist against the glass. Bad idea, sloppy, and the last tango notices the noise. Being stuck in this spectator role has gotten to me. Not anymore though, I yank on the door handle to get out. Nothing, still locked, no matter how much I pry the lock stays engaged. The enemy walks up to my door, weapon raised, and takes aim from only a few feet away. No guarantees the glass will hold at that range. With no recourse, I aim my own weapon at him from inside the vehicle. One of us is going to die, and it all depends on whose bullet makes it through

the window first. I'm committing to pulling the trigger, and I can see the other soldier's own finger tense, when the side of his head explodes outward in a gory mess.

Chokey walks past the window, back to me, and puts two more in the man's chest before kicking the enemy's fallen rifle away from him. Without so much as a word to me, he backtracks to the other four downed enemies and double-taps each of them before disarming them for good measure. We aren't supposed to do that, shooting the incapacitated. Somehow I doubt anyone will care even if I report it. I won't. The man just saved my life, taking on five enemy soldiers alone at close range. That much better indeed.

When Chokey is done kill-checking the bodies, he does a fast circuit of the vehicles, fast but cautious, making sure there aren't any hidden threats. When he is satisfied, he comes back to my vehicle, pressing a button attached to his wrist. The vehicles unlocks. When he gets closer, I can see the straight gash a bullet made as it sliced across his cheek and was caught by the inside of his helmet. A sheet of blood covers his cheek. In spite of this, he smiles, winces, then keeps smiling when he cracks the door far enough to ask me to get him one of the spare blood-clotting bandages from the medical kit in the vehicle.

"That was some excellent work, Private," I say, my brain not coming up with anything better. The whole thing, first shot to last shot, couldn't have taken more than a couple minutes. In that time my whole perception of the spooks has shifted. I knew they got better gear and more training and were held up as the epitome of an elite soldier, everyone knows that. But there is a difference between knowing and understanding. No other soldier I know could do what this affable private just did. Some might have survived, but none could have made it look so easy and come out smiling on the other side. My mind replays the casual way he shot them all again once they were down, how reflexive it was. It's the kind of natural response that only comes with

practice. Most soldiers in the forest don't get the opportunity to have that experience after an engagement, many won't even know which bodies belong to them and which were shot by others. How many enemies has the spooks' newest member removed from the battle grid to train that kill-check to be so casual?

"Thank you, Sergeant," the smile turns into a grin. The grin doesn't falter when it tugs on the open wound the graze left, but Chokey does subdue his face to apply the bandage before assuming his security position outside my vehicle once more. He does not insist that I shut the door again, but does block the vulnerable crack with his body.

"Sorry about locking you in like that—by the way, Sergeant," he goes on, "Sergeant Boru left orders to keep you alive no matter what." It occurs to me that the orders were to keep me alive, not necessarily keep me safe. Given Sergeant Boru's questionable disposition towards me I have to wonder if that was a deliberate choice of words.

"Understood, Private, although a little warning would be nice. I'm having trouble adjusting to my new role as someone who matters to the army." We both chuckle at the joke.

"I'll keep that in mind, Sergeant James." I let the use of my first name go, whatever the orders, this kid earned it today.

We hear crashing from the trees and Chokey's comms beep on, relaying Sergeant Boru's voice to us: "Pvt. Chokey, we are inbound and in a hurry, get ready to move." In the aftermath of our own action I'd managed to put out of my mind the danger our comrades were facing for a brief moment. It comes crashing back on me now and Chokey dashes around to the driver's seat of the Humvee and brings the engine growling to life. Soldiers begin streaming out of the trees and into vehicles as fast as they're able, which is fast for these efficient spooks. I see Ricky bowl his way through a shrub rather than go around it, cradling his arm, weapon slung across his back,

and jump into the vehicle behind mine. With all the rapid movement and bodies circulating into Humvee seats, I can't make out the members of my team that don't share Ricky's distinguishing size. Boru flies out of the forest last, then turns with the few others who had lagged behind the main group. Each of them rips the pin out of one smoke grenade after the other and hurls them back into the trees, then spins on their heels and flies back into the relative safety of the vehicles.

"Go," Boru orders as soon as his ass is in its seat and the door is starting to close. Chokey doesn't waste time gunning the engine and executing a U-turn that takes us off the road and into the ditch at its side, then jars us back onto the hard-packed, uneven surface of the road. Safety regulations don't permit vehicles to go above thirty miles per hour on most forest roads due to the poor conditions and the ease with which the ground tends to suck down our tires. Such regulations are, of course, ignored in times of duress. Chokey seems to decide that this qualifies as extreme duress, proceeding to send our vehicle hurtling away at the closest to seventy I've ever seen or heard of someone getting when they weren't on one of the continent's few major highways.

"Sergeant Boru," I have to yell to be heard over the shaking and rattling of our vehicle's various parts, "What happened? what's the status of my team?"

"Team's fine," he yells back. "Debrief at base." It doesn't seem sensible to push him right now. His chest heaves from the exertion of the brief engagement and subsequent retreat. As long as my men are okay I'm happy to wait to talk about the rest. Although, I wonder what the spook sergeant's definition of fine is as I recall the way Ricky was cradling his arm when he ran. If I try to talk any more right now I'll probably bite my tongue off. I let it go and brace myself against the Humvee's frequent but short lived reconnections with Earth that intersperse its much

more prolonged air time. Maybe I'll recommend Private Chokey get a transfer to flight school when we make it back to base.



## Chapter V: What goes up

Chokey doesn't let up on the pedal the entire ride back to base. None of the spec-ops soldiers seem perturbed by our driver's propensity for keeping the wheels off the ground, and Sergeant Boru doesn't order him to slow down, so I keep my mouth shut. I bite my metaphorical cheek and try not to bite my literal one. The upside is the trip takes less than half the time it did going out. Before I know it, Boru is using a short-range radio to signal the base we're coming in and to say please, please, don't blow us away when we break the tree line. They oblige, and Chokey finally stamps down on the break after we've cleared the perimeter fence, bringing us to a skidding halt. The other vehicles in our group follow suit, forming a horseshoe surrounding the gate's entrance; soldiers pour out of the barracks as well as the vehicles, reinforcing every defensive position around the fence.

I find myself being ushered out of the vehicle by Chokey and towards the building that houses Taksa's office. A spook squad rounds up my team and trails behind us, except Ricky who is being guided towards the medical facility that I woke up in. He's moving under his own power, which is a good sign.

"Why are we heading away from the perimeter?" I ask Chokey as we jog towards the bunker.

"We don't know if that enemy force is going to follow us or not," he replies.

"Shouldn't we be assisting in the defense then?"

"Look, I know you're an infantry soldier normally, Sergeant," he says, "but you're not right now. Right now, you're the intel, we can't let you get killed. If you do get killed, your men are the next best bet."

“Sergeant Boru used my men in that engagement.” We’re coming up on the bunker now and the door is already sliding open for us.

“That was relatively low-risk. It was fast, hit and run, little opportunity for things to go wrong. If whatever force was out there decides this base has been here too long, decides they want a prolonged engagement here, there’s nowhere to run. Nearest friendly base is hours away by veh—” Chokey stops mid-word and I realize he’s just told me something he wasn’t supposed to. The private looks a little pale inside his helmet, though it could just be from the wound saturating the bandage on his face with blood. I wonder how serious a breach of confidentiality that was. Given how secretive everyone on this base has been, probably pretty serious. Before I can give it more thought we’re inside. Chokey doesn’t let me wait at the threshold for my team, instead hurrying me along, through the hallways, through the next set of reinforced doors, past Taksa’s office, and down another set of stairs around a corner. Finally, I’m brought into what looks like a safe room. Yet another of the armor-plated doors slides into place, coming down from the ceiling rather than out from the wall, and secures itself. The resounding clank of the bolts locking the door can be felt in the metal flooring.

“What about my team?” I ask Chokey, who looks like he’s taking his first slow breath in hours.

“They’ll be brought elsewhere in the building. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket, right?” He smirks, but I can’t tell if it’s because of the analogy, or because of how ridiculous separating us seems. I’m two levels underground in the most durable room I’ve ever seen in one of the most durable buildings I’ve ever been in. If something can reach me down here, it’s going to reach my team wherever they are in the building.

Instead of answering him, I look around the room, taking in my meager surroundings. It's small, like the dorms of my friends from highschool, whose colleges I'd visit on leave when I was younger. There are two bunk-beds, one against either wall, a latrine with a fold-out divider for some semblance of privacy, a sink, and a handful of lockers. Everything is the same bare-metal aesthetic, the walls and ceiling the same material as the floor. Could probably have a missile hit this room directly without cracking it.

"How long are we going to stay down here?" I ask.

"Until we're told it's safe," he says. "Probably won't be too long, but if we're lucky we'll spend the night down here."

"If we're lucky?"

"Some of the boys up in the barracks snore like you wouldn't believe. Private room is the luckiest a guy gets out here." Chokey walks over to one of the lockers and opens it. From inside he pulls out two ration packs, tossing me one. Catching the innocuous brown plastic container, I read the label: meatloaf.

"If you prefer breakfast for dinner I might be able to find an omelette pack in here," Chokey offers, but I shake my head. Then I'm hit with the gnawing hunger that the stress and excitement of my day has pushed down.

We take seats on opposite bunks and eat in silence for several minutes. The young private eats no less ravenously than I do and doesn't seem bothered at all by the way chewing works the muscles in his face, shifting the bandage, and doubtless the damage underneath it. When the pit in my stomach starts to feel less cavernous, I decide it's time to fish a little. Chokey already slipped up outside—it was a little thing with the base distance from friendlies, but something. Maybe I can get him to open up more. There is a part of my mind that's telling me to leave it

alone, that need-to-know is need-to-know for a reason, but I'm here, my *team* is here, and with everything going on I want more information before I'm forced to start making decisions.

"Doesn't that hurt?" I wave a hand to the corresponding location on my own face to indicate Chokey's injury.

"Not too bad, bandage has local anesthetic in it, numbs you up pretty well," he says between putting small handfuls of peanuts into his mouth.

"That local anesthetic barely covers a bug bite, I've used those before."

"You haven't used these ones, they don't circulate for regular military, even spec-ops don't usually get them."

"Why do you guys then? Aren't you spec-ops?" His chewing slows down and he looks at me over a cupped hand, filled with the last of his nuts. There's no way I can question him without setting off alarms in his head, even young as he is, he's too well trained. My best bet is just to ease him into it, ask him things that are obvious, get him to confirm what he knows I already know. No harm in stating the obvious, right?

"We are," he starts, then pauses for a moment while he thinks about how to evade the question.

"But?" I prompt, unwilling to give him the time he wants to come up with a more sophisticated answer.

"We don't get the headline coverage other spec-ops does. You know how it is, public needs heroes, even when heroes need to be able to work without a spotlight." I nod, because he's right, and because I want him to know I agree with him, want to narrow the gulf set between us by our different commands. Brass can tell us what it wants, but on the ground we're all in the same uniforms. I'm glad I'm outfitted in one of the uniforms from this base right now. The

spook uniforms have different camouflage, if only by a little bit, and they fit tighter than the basic combat uniform I'm accustomed to. A result of better funding and more sizing options I suspect.

"That just means you guys are doing the grit work, right? Stuff not pretty enough for civilians."

"You've been out here, Sergeant, you know it's all grit work." For a second his cheerful bravado slips an inch, the smile lines around his eyes sag into crags as deep as any forest veterans, and he looks sad, and haunted, and tired. He looks like he's spent years squinting into the bushes, around trees, and through the sweat dripping into his eyes. He looks like he's been hunted his whole life. Then it's gone, the cheerful private is back, the cocky, "that-much-better," youngest, spec-ops soldier I've ever seen.

"Besides," he continues, "no fame means less oversight, and less oversight means less brass breathing down our necks about PR, and gear costs, and all that. Though I'd like to see any general try to backseat-command Colonel Taksa."

"He didn't seem like that much of a hard-ass when I spoke with him." I leave the statement open ended, like it's a question or a challenge to his assessment of the man.

"He doesn't dislike you, and he needs you." Chokey sounds like he's joking, but you don't end up in command of spooks, let alone an entire base of them, if you don't have metal in you. It's troubling to consider the way in which the colonel needs me, and what's going to happen when I give him what he wants. Or if I can't. Perhaps I let my concerns show on my face more than I mean to because some of the jovial nature leaves Chokey and he says, "Don't worry, Sergeant James, the man's fair. He's been running this base since I got here and I've never seen a soldier have a problem with him."

“And how long has that been, *Private*,” I emphasize his rank, drawing attention to his age, “A few months?”

“A few months? Damn, Sarge, I knew I looked young, but not that young. I’ve been out here a year already.”

A year? How is he still a private? Between training time and deployment time he should be at *least* a corporal by now. I don’t voice the question, demotions can be sensitive subjects, even for the light-hearted. It does raise questions about how he ended up here though. No matter how good he is at what he does, what kind of commander wants a soldier that’s been demoted in such a sensitive mission area? Either Colonel Taksa doesn’t have the clout Chokey claims he does, or he’s even more atypical than I imagined.

The silence falls back into place without even the small noises of our meal to interrupt it this time. I realize how tired I am. Being unconscious for days in the medical facility did little to ease the accumulated fatigue I feel from having been in the forest for so long this deployment. On the contrary, it’s made everything feel heavier. My body didn’t get a warm-up before being thrown back into the rigors of action, from cold to hot, flat-footed to full sprint, and it’s worn me out like an old uniform going through one wash cycle too many times.

I want to stay alert, want to wait for news of what’s happening outside the ultra-secure bunk I share with Chokey, so cut off from what’s going on just a few dozen linear yards away. I can’t though. I feel my consciousness ebbing, slipping away with the last remnants of the adrenaline that’s been burning inside me for the last several hours. The food I just ate sits like a full ammo box in my stomach, bloating me in a comfortable fashion. Without thinking I loosen my boots, pulling my feet out and leaving them at the side of the bunk I’m on. I’ll be able to slip my feet in and tighten them again in seconds if I need to. Chokey says nothing as I recline onto

the firm mattress, legs only just able to be straightened without my feet running into the rail at the foot of the bunk.

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“Just a deer in the bushes,” I say into the radio, receiving confirmation of the all-clear in return. Neither the Lieutenant nor the mysterious Captain make comments on fire discipline. They’re both aware that in these woods it’s better to be safe than sorry.

“Damn, Ricky,” Jacobs calls up, loud enough for our gunner to hear over the sounds of the vehicle and his own hearing protection. “Why’d you have to blow it away like that, could have added it to chow if you’d left enough.” Ricky manages to kick his seat without having to descend into the cab.

It takes time for the adrenaline that comes with the expectation of impending combat to die down, and it always leaves me feeling drained afterwards. It’s actually worse without the followthrough of getting shot at, because I don’t feel like I have an excuse to be tired no matter how many times the science gets explained to me. I’m still riding the dregs of the high when the last vehicle finishes its traversal around the hill and we can all see each other again.

I breathe a sigh of relief identical to hundreds before it. It’s long, and exhausted, and in my head. We all feel the same way, but none of us will show it. Showing it is just letting the enemy take one more thing from us. Chip away at our morale, our pride that little bit more. We won’t give them that, not when they aren’t even here to die for it.

Minutes go by and the lethargy tries to set in, fighting against the stimulants we all took before we left that morning. No matter how much caffeine and B-vitamins you pump into your system, an adrenaline crash will always take something from you that you don’t get back without sleep or more adrenaline. Havcoff yawns next to me and I nudge his canteen. He drinks, the cold

water bringing a little more animation to his face than it had before. He nods at me and turns back to his window, resuming his surveyance of the forest.

Jacobs and Jarez are shooting the shit up front again, something about the tactical viability of zip lines and reclaiming the high ground from the enemy. Sometimes I think those two missed their calling in the intelligence branch, or maybe even research and development.

Leaning forward, I tap a particular rhythm on Ricky's leg. Not the signal to come down from before, just a status check. One of the man's giant booted feet taps its heel twice. He's squared away. I'll check again in a few minutes, he probably got more hyped than any of us having been the one to actually discharge his weapon. Even mounted as they are, the reverberations alone from the heavy machine guns on the vehicles are enough to wake a man from a coma. They actually used to be worse, but the military finally got sick of having to replace the bolts in the mounting apparatus when the metal wear would cause them to shear off.

Satisfied for the moment that my team is still operating efficiently, I take a drink from my own canteen and redirect my gaze outside the window next to me, then out the front windscreen from between Jacobs' and Jarez's seats, and finally down to a map I've kept tucked in my uniform pocket. It takes me a minute to get my bearings, but once I do I'm surprised by how far we've drifted from our regular patrol area. The base we started from was already one of those farthest into the forest, and since then, we've traversed enough distance to have bypassed even our most tenuous of outposts. Wherever this Cpt. Walden is leading us, it's outside what I've come to think of as my team's comfort zone, the zone in which we are at least marginally familiar with most of the terrain. Any small advantage we had from all that time spent in that particular section of forest is gone now, and the possibility of attack rises even as the possibility for viable reinforcements shrinks.



“Another blind turn, coming up,” Jacob’s calls back. Another turn? There’s no turn on the map. I double-check my position with the GPS, then by hand, retracing our path with a finger. Definitely no turn here.

“Losing visual on vehicle one now,” Jacobs reports.

“Wait, tell them to stop,” I say, looking up just in time to see vehicle one’s rear tires disappearing around a raised plateau ahead. Jarez reaches for the radio, but before he’s clicked the transmit button, the sound of an explosion washes over our vehicle, and the ground shakes hard enough for us all to feel it through the regular bumps and rumbling of the dirt road. Ricky ducks down, bending at the knees and lowering his head to avoid any potential shrapnel, reflexes faster than anyone else’s. Cpt. Walden’s voice comes over the comms: “Enemy ahead, unknown force. Vehicle two moving forward to support, ensuing vehicles, follow.” With that, vehicle two, the one with the captain in it, accelerates out of sight around the plateau.

“Hang on,” Jacobs yells, and steps on the gas, but our Humvee skids sideways on loose, wet earth. The vehicle cants across the road, blocking the three behind us from moving up. Gunfire erupts from the hidden side of the plateau. Some of it is the cracks of our standard issue carbines, but most of it is the lower notes of enemy rifles. Notably absent is the sound of either vehicle-mounted gun that should be drowning out all the other small arms fire. Its absence triggers an instinctive part of me, telling me just how bad the situation is and making my gut churn. Our lieutenant seems to feel the same way because he’s already pulling my door open for cover, having just dashed up from his place in the vehicle behind mine.

“You and your team hold here while the rest of us push up. Cover our backs and protect the vehicles.” He relays the plan into the platoon comms, then takes position with the lead team as the remainder of our already depleted platoon bounds forward to cover. There is an

uncharacteristic lack of any such cover considering the density of the forest around us. The fact niggles at the back of my mind, but there isn't time to consider it now.

“Ricky, stay on the big gun. Havcoff, go get on vehicle four's gun and watch our back. Jacobs, Jarez—” I'm cut off by louder gunfire and shouts of surprise and pain. Enemies have appeared on our side of the plateau. Nestled behind trees and rocks on the top of the elevation, they have excellent cover. Many of them I wouldn't have seen at all if it weren't for the flash of weapon muzzles giving away their position.

The team that was in movement during their leapfrog bound forward is caught in the open and cut down before I can finish processing the sight. The other two teams are pinned in whatever meager cover they had managed to take during their hurried movement to assist our out-of-sight forward vehicles.

Ricky opens up with the gun, firing long bursts, panning his sights across the top of the plateau, trying to suppress the enemy enough for the other teams to get better positioning. He's only partly effective, having to duck back into the vehicle after several seconds to avoid retaliation from what seems to be a superior number of enemy combatants on the ridge.

“Jacobs, Jarez, with me,” I shout. I don't have time to worry about Havcoff and Ricky, I just have to trust them to stay alive and do their best to support our comrades. My two teammates in tow, I leave the vehicle at a dash, head tucked and carbine in hand, heading for the nearest dense foliage. The enemies, focusing on the larger threat of the vehicle-mounted weapons, don't bother shooting at a few more small fish in the barrel they've constructed.

By virtue of Ricky's presence and perhaps some small miracle, all three of us make it into the trees unmolested. We only slow as much as we have to given the worse terrain as we force our way deep enough to lose sight of the enemies on the high ground, and, more

importantly, for them to lose sight of us. Once we manage this, we veer right, setting our course for the only side of the plateau we aren't certain has shooters posted on it. I don't need to explain to the other two what I'm planning—without time to plan this is the best course we can take for our friends, even if it means we aren't adding our weapons to the fight while they're taking casualties.

It takes us almost a full minute of crashing through underbrush and low-hanging branches to cover the distance to the plateau, and the time eats at my soul as I hear my friends dying just out of sight. Still, we slow down as we approach a set of small outcroppings that resemble giant steps leading up to the relative flatness where the enemy soldiers have taken up position. Even with all the gunfire and the occasional explosion, we still might get overheard if we continue at our reckless pace forward. The extra caution costs us time, but it's better than wasting our effort and taking time away from the fight by getting found before we can recoup that effort in blood.

The anger and grim rage at the deaths of our friends is on all our faces as we crest the lip of the final ridge, unnoticed by the dozens of enemy soldiers with their backs to us. Before we move, a slight shift in the corner of my eyes makes me freeze, and the other two follow suit. There *is* a rear guard, but only one, and he hasn't seen us. He's looking deeper into the forest, perhaps having heard us crashing around before, losing the thread of our approach after we slowed. I'm raising my rifle to take him, the motion gradual so the suddenness doesn't catch his eye, when Jacobs slithers over the edge and is on the man, prone as he is in cover.

Jacobs' steady left hand cups the sentry's mouth, silencing him and holding his head still while his right drives a fixed-blade boot knife into the base of his skull. As fast as it happened, it's over and Jacobs has retreated behind the ridge with us again, leaving the dead man in his

position, fate obscured to his comrades by the cover meant to keep him safe. There is no remorse in my jovial friend's eyes when he glances over at us.

The killing did nothing to soothe the visage of Jacobs' eyes. I hold up three fingers in front of those eyes where Jarez can see them as well. I drop one finger, then another, then the last one, and we're all over the ridge together. Moving in synchronized efficiency we seek alternate cover, taking up overlapping firing positions before the first of the foreign combatants notices us. That first one is reloading, unpracticed hands scrabbling at his carrying system, and he only sees us because he has to take his eyes from the killing ground to find the rifle magazine. When he looks up we make eye contact across the optics of my carbine, then I put a round through his skull.

For four invaluable seconds we might as well be shooting at a target range. All three of us dropping one, then another, then another while the termites realize their danger and scramble to reorient. There's too many, though, and before long we're forced down. One of my team pops up and fires off a shot, but gets slapped down by a round to the chest. I can't see which one, can't raise my head to look without having it blown off. My lizard brain is screaming at me to curl into a ball, to protect myself, to run, to do anything but stay as I am. Chips of rock from the boulder I'm behind shower over me, plinking off my helmet, cutting the back of my neck where the skin is exposed.

My radio crackles and Cpt. Walden's voice warbles through, but I can't hear what it's saying. I can't make out specific noises beyond the unending racket of rifle fire and the ceaseless rush of blood in my ears. The tone is enough to snap me out of my panic, to wake up the soldier reflexes.

I yell to my teammates, hoping whichever friend is down is still alive, still fighting. When they lift their helmets I can see that it's Jarez on the ground, and I don't see the telltale dark of bloodstains. His vest caught the bullet for him. When they're both looking, I motion to the single grenade attached to my vest, and hold five fingers over it. We'll be throwing blind, but it might buy us a few seconds to reposition. It's the only action I can think of to buy us a chance.

Without exposing myself or looking back at my teammates, I lob the grenade over my cover and hope. A cry of alarm goes up, followed by the three explosions of our grenades. I'm already dashing away from my cover, staying low to minimize the chance of catching a stray round or unlucky bit of shrapnel. In my periphery, Jacobs and Jarez are moving too, but slower. Jacobs is half dragging Jarez who must still be winded from the bullet to his diaphragm. I can't reach them to help. Too much open ground and there are still enemies on the plateau, no doubt rallying to resume their attack.

Then I'm over the edge again, dropping off the side closest to my previous cover. I didn't look before I leaped, there's no intermittent ledges between the plateau shelf and the ground. I fall the full ten feet, rolling when I land more by happenstance than intent. I think I lose a second or two, because suddenly I'm lying still, half on my side, half on my back, looking away from the plateau. I can see the smoking wreck of vehicle one peeking from around the corner of the plateau. They'd almost made it around before they got hit.

I take a deep breath and roll towards the base of the plateau. Nobody shoots me so I assume the enemy is distracted elsewhere, an assumption corroborated by the escalating cracks of friendly carbines. The sound is still outmatched by that of the enemy rifles, and the bass of the vehicle's turrets has not returned since Ricky's covering salvo.

I have a precious few seconds to collect myself. I'm cut off from Jacobs and Jarez, they must have dropped off the other side. Trying to push back to them would be suicide. The enemy won't make the same mistake twice. That means I can't get back up to the top of the ridge at all. The cliff face, despite its relative smallness, is sheer. Without a boost I can't hope to reach the ten-foot lip, especially hauling my carbine and the rest of my gear along.

That leaves me with only two options. I can walk away from the fight, away from my comrades, and away from friendly territory deeper into the forest in the direction we were going. An unattractive option in every way, and one that would leave my back exposed as I got farther away from the base of the elevated land. So one option. I wrap around towards the hit vehicles, looking to find or create a new opportunity in the situation over there. It doesn't occur to me to stay put. I'm exposed, my comrades are dying, and staying here means giving up whatever initiative I've reclaimed since the enemy engaged us.

Shouldering my weapon I advance in the selected direction, my steps slow and soft so as not to alert the enemy above. *Slow is smooth, smooth is fast*, I repeat in my mind to suppress the instinct telling me to rush towards my friends. *Slow is smooth, smooth is fast*.

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"Sergeant James," Chokey's voice rouses me from my stupor, "Sergeant James, Colonel Taksa is ordering us to meet him up in his office." Groggy from a combination of the unintentional nature of my nap, the events of the day up to this point, and the vividness of my dreams—memories?—it takes me a minute to get my bearings on the room around me. Not that there is much to account for, the room is as minimal now as it was when I fell asleep. Two bunks, lockers, armor plating.

“What’s the status outside?” I ask, swinging my legs off the bunk and being careful not to smack my head into the bunk rack above me.

“No word,” Chokey tells me, “But if it were too bad the colonel would have bigger things on his mind than us, right?”

“Right,” I affirm, though in the back of my mind I’m not so sure. The colonel has devoted a lot of resources to getting this package, whatever’s inside it, and by proxy a lot of resources into me. I’m used to not knowing exactly what’s on the minds of the people giving me orders but not to being front and center in those minds. It leaves me feeling exposed, vulnerable, like I’m both a player and a piece in a game I don’t know and nobody has bothered to tell me the rules. When I joined the military, an older vet told me never to volunteer for anything. That seemed ridiculous at first, until it didn’t anymore. Nobody wants too much attention on them without the power to make their own decisions. That’s where I’m at now. Lots of attention, lots of pressure, and no idea what I’m doing. It feels like I’m back in basic training.

“Let’s go,” I say after slipping into my boots and retightening their laces. Chokey takes point out the door, and it occurs to me that he is the first spec-op spook to expose his back to me on this base.

Chokey stays just far enough ahead of me so that he is always completely around a corner before any part of me is exposed. It feels unnecessary inside the sturdy confines of the bunker, but training doesn’t just turn on and off, especially not once it’s been put into practice in a place like the forest.

Only a minute or two after I’ve declared my readiness, we’re standing outside Colonel Taksa’s office. In spite of the supposed danger outside, the door remains open and the colonel sits at his desk looking the same as he did the last time I saw him.

“Thank you, Private, you may remain at the door. Sergeant, come have a seat.” The perfunctory order is issued before either Chokey or I have managed to offer a salute. The colonel may not care for niceties enough to guise his orders as requests the way some officers I know do, but he seems to show the same level of unconcern for standing on ceremony he deems unnecessary.

Chokey falls in position adjacent to the door’s opening, and while his head remains forward at attention, I can tell his focus is in the direction of the entrance to the building. For my part, I oblige the colonel by entering his office and taking the same plain metal chair that I sat in last time. The door whisks shut behind me, lock engaging.

I feel less comfortable for my disconnection from Pvt. Chokey. He is a soldier under Colonel Taksa’s command, but his presence was more human than his commanding officer’s, and without it I feel alone beneath the scrutiny of the colonel in a way I have never felt in the presence of any other soldier of the military since enlisting.

“Sir,” I say, and manage to complete a quick salute before he waves a hand at the chair, less than patiently this time. I take the seat.

“I’m sure you’re wondering what’s happening topside right now. I would be too, so I’ll tell you before we begin so there are no distractions,” the colonel says, still not looking up from the tablet on his desk. “For all intents and purposes nothing has happened, and nothing is happening.”

“For all intents and purposes, Sir?” I ask.

“The enemy pursued Sergeant Boru, his men, and yourself, but did not come within two miles of the base. They know we’re here, there is no hiding a base from them in their own forest, but that does not mean it is a target worth striking for them.”



“I see, Sir,” I say, although I feel that there is much the man is not telling me. Perhaps he can sense this, because he replies, “I’m sure, Sergeant,” before continuing, “Now, have our labors paid dividends? What do you remember?” I meet Colonel Taksa’s eyes, and I can read nothing there. No hint at what’s going on in his head. Not so much as a flicker of concern, or uncertainty, not a single wrinkle creased by a muscle tightening. Do I tell this man everything I remembered?

I have no reason not to beyond the unease in my gut, so I do. I recount for him as much as I recalled during my sleep in the safe room downstairs. When I’m done, I don’t know how to end, so I trail off, adding a belated, “That’s as far as I can recall right now, sir.”

“I will not deceive you, Sergeant, I had hoped for more. Still, this is progress, which makes me optimistic that you will recover the rest of your memories. What you have told me corroborates what we know from other sources so far, as well, which will set some minds at ease.” I am surprised by the commanding officer’s willingness to admit that there were doubts about my character. I am not sure I believe the tacit suggestion that he was not one of those uneasy minds, however.

“If I may ask, Sir, what now?”

“Now, Sergeant?”

“My men and I, Sir, we’ve been away from the remainder of our platoon, and our base, for several days. We’d like to get back.” I speak for my men, knowing it is on their minds as much or more than it is on my own, but not hopeful that I’ll get to leave. I’m the one with the information the colonel needs, but perhaps he’ll compromise and allow my men to go, to mourn the losses of the other members of our platoon in the company of those who still live.

“You’ve made great progress in remembering in just a single day, and the package we seek is of the highest priority. I can’t let you, or your men, return to base right now. Even if I did, with the enemy forces still riled up in the area it would be too dangerous to dispatch you, even with an escort.”

“What is the plan then, Sir, if I may ask?”

“I will consult the medical staff again, in light of your rapidly returning memory, but I think having you spend a few more days here at least would be best for everyone. I believe you have another soldier from your platoon still in medical who should be ready for visitors soon, but not travel, yes?” With everything going on I had forgotten Pickmin. Guilt washes over me, leaving a sour feeling in my mouth and a lead weight in my intestines. The colonel dismisses me with few words beyond that, and I step out of his office, the relief from my escape tainted by the lingering guilt for forgetting about Pickmin.

Chokey falls in beside me as I leave the office threshold, and together we make our way towards the bunker’s exit. Somehow, Chokey has been made aware that it is safe outside once more.

“Private,” I say by way of initiating my coming question so that it carries the weight of rank behind it, “Why does no one on this base use wireless comms inside the perimeter?” It’s been bugging me since I saw the inset communications screen in their barracks, and the wires running up the leg of Colonel Taksa’s desk. Everything this spook base uses is cutting-edge; why use wired comms?

“You noticed that, huh, Sergeant?” Chokey replies, glancing at me. “Well I guess it’s not much of a secret once someone pays attention. Security heads on base don’t like to let even short-range wireless signals originate where they might be picked up or triangulated.” That

answer would make sense if Colonel Taksa hadn't just admitted to me that the enemy was aware of the base already. Who are they hiding from out here—our own forces? I don't push Chokey on the point, now isn't the time or place to go digging for information that isn't critical. Instead, I ask him to take me to the rest of my men, who have apparently already been brought back to the barracks as that's where he leads me.

It's dark out when we exit the bunker. I must have slept longer than I thought back in the safe room. I come to a stop only a little ways beyond the bunker's armored door. Chokey stops too, watching my upturned gaze with an amused understanding.

“Didn't realize how much you missed them, did you?”

“No,” I say. In the relative safety of the spook base, Chokey and I look up at the stars together. I haven't seen more than a glimpse of a star through the dense canopy of the forest's treetops in months. Back on my regular base there's too much light pollution, too much going on to be able to stop and appreciate the sight. Here though, with all the spook secrecy, there are no exterior lights on the base that could be seen from a passing aircraft. It seems a foolish and unnecessary measure with the level of night vision both sides of this war possess, but it's one I appreciate in this moment.

## Chapter VI: Unforgotten friends

Chokey and I don't linger in the dark long. It's exposed, no matter how many guards stand watch or patrol the perimeter fence. After only a minute or two Chokey is prompting me to move on, appreciative of the night sky, but not distracted from his duty of protecting the information in my head.

We make our quick way over to the barracks again, and when we walk in I'm surprised to find it all but devoid of spooks. There are only a couple of the expressionless soldiers, standing as silent sentries halfway down the bunker. My men, including a bandaged Ricky, have resumed their place in the back corner of the structure, past all the rows of double bunks and storage lockers.

Chokey hangs back to exchange quiet words with the other spooks while I make my way to join my comrades. It's odd, seeing the juxtaposition of the animated Pvt. Chokey with his reserved counterparts. Still, stealing a look over my shoulder, I think I see one of the soldiers cracking a smile at something Chokey says, but the harsh overhead lighting of the barracks casts grim shadows across an already gaunt face making it difficult to tell.

The mood amongst my men is a solemn one. They stand huddled in a circle, each holding a plain metal mug. Jarez hands me one when I'm within range, and I can feel the warmth and taste the scent of hot military coffee emanating from the small vessel. I sip the watery brew, savoring the kick of caffeine and the heat as it spreads from my throat to the rest of my body. Even bad coffee is still coffee, and that's worlds better than anything else right now, except possibly a hard drink.

“We were just talking about the rest of the platoon,” Havcoff offers as a buffer to a menacing silence.

“Do you know who didn’t make it?” I ask the group as a whole.

“Not all of them, but I saw Bradley and Gamble go down,” Ricky says.

“And everyone in vehicle one,” Jacobs adds.

“Tyree too,” from Jarez.

“Kreel and Brown,” Havcoff says. A silence breaks out and hangs in the air. None of them seem to want to say what we’re all thinking. That’s already a third of our platoon, and we know we haven’t counted everyone yet. I notice the absoluteness of the void in the room and realize that the spooks have retreated to the absolute end of the barracks, where they stand in silence with their backs turned. Even Chokey has a subdued air about him. They understand, and they’re doing their best to give us space without violating whatever orders they’ve been given to watch us. I allow the moment to continue a few seconds more, let my men grieve in the limited capacity we’re able to in this place, before breaking the silence to bring their spirits up.

“The colonel said we should be able to visit Pickmin soon.”

“She’s feeling better?” Havcoff perks up at the mention of her name.

“Supposedly,” I answer, “We’ll find out tomorrow. In any case, we’ll be here at least a few more days while things calm down out there.” I wave vaguely to the outside.

“We don’t get to head home yet?” Jarez asks. *Home*, I think, *How much time have any of us spent home, Jarez?* Maria’s laughter tinkles around the edges of my mind, faint and almost imperceptible. It’s been so long since I heard her laugh. I lost it somewhere in the forest with so much else. Then it clicks for me that Jarez means our base just a few hazardous hours away, not the place where our families are, and I come to another realization: I’ve never heard Jarez talk

about his family. Girlfriends, sure, some friends, but never anything permanent. I wonder just how lost in the forest the younger man might be getting without anything to anchor him to his home life.

“Didn’t expect we would,” Jacobs says. “These spooks haven’t pried open Sarge’s head yet.” He reaches out to knuckle the top of my head, only stopping when I raise an eyebrow at him.

“Think of this as a little R-and-R. I can’t imagine the boys on this base will be too keen on us moving around too much, so I imagine you guys will get plenty of time to rest up. Especially you,” I add, nodding at Ricky, who is cradling his arm in a sling.

“I just got nicked is all,” he says. “I’ll be good to go before we need to head back.”

“Docs here are an overcautious lot.” We all jump, not having noticed Chokey approaching from the entrance. “We all get too much training to take chances with half-assed recoveries. Might as well take the good treatment while you’re here,” he says to Ricky, who is looking at him with narrowed eyes. No soldier likes getting snuck up on, but Ricky has a particular dislike of it, possibly due to his position as the most often exposed member of our team in the vehicle turret. Jacobs is also averse to surprises, but he lacks the ingrained paranoia that Ricky carries with him.

“Guys, this is Pvt. Chokey,” I introduce the spook with an almost imperceptible inclination of my head to let them know he’s okay. They introduce themselves by rank and last name, Ricky hesitating an extra moment at the end before following suit.

“Nice to meet you boys properly,” Chokey says, “It was getting a little weird just watching you through the cameras all the time. He laughs, and the others chuckle, but the tension between my men and the private seems only to grow.

“The private here saved my ass while you guys were off giving the termites something to think about, took out a handful of them all by himself.” Hopefully that will buy Chokey a little leeway with the others.

“Oh, saving our Sarge from ending up a pile of termite dung?” Jacobs decides to play nice and brings out some of his usual light humor.

“He might tell it that way, but really that’s exaggerating,” Chokey replies.

“Why’s that?” Havcoff follows Jacobs lead and plays along.

“Cuz really, I just saved your sergeant from himself. He was looking to shoot a termite from inside a Humvee. Don’t y’all know what ricochet is?” My face flushes as Chokey retells the events of earlier that day. The others guffaw at my desperate actions, and even Ricky seems to have warmed up to Chokey by the end of it, going so far as to smirk a little.

“How’d those other boys get away after we helped out?” The big man asks when the laughter is dying down and Jarez is mopping the tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes with his uniform cuff.

“No clue,” Chokey says. “They weren’t our boys, they belonged to some other base, not sure which.”

“Is that all you guys do out here,” I interject, “Go around saving other units’ asses?”

“It is if you ask any of the brass that’s never been here,” Chokey winks.

“Something tells me we’re going to be signing a lot of forms declaring our unending intention never to ask or say anything about this place again after we leave.” Ricky’s voice is almost free of accusation. Almost.

“Nah, man, you sign anything and that’ll leave a paper trail,” Jacobs says nudging him, “Spooks just look at you real hard and can tell if you’re going to be naughty or nice.”

“Like a proactive Santa Claus,” Havcoff chimes in. Everyone stops and looks at him.

“A what?” Two of us ask at once.

“You know, Santa Claus,” he says somewhat defensive with his tone.

“What the hell is a Santa Claus?”

“It’s a spirit that brings joy and gifts to well-behaved kids in a bunch of old cultures.”

He’s looking at us like we’re all idiots now.

“Where did you go to school again, Half-calf?” Jacobs asks.

“I was homeschooled,” Havcoff says, “But my mom said she modeled all her classes off a standard—” He trails off as five heads shake at him.

“What subject did your mother say you were studying?” Jarez asks.

“Pre-twenty-second century societies and cultures.”

“And what grade was this supposed to be in?”

“Ninth.” His face is deadpan. I look over at Jacobs.

“I think you’re going to have to stop lording that college education over us, Jacobs.

Havcoff’s high school was harder.”

Jacobs nods in perturbed agreement.

“Well, I’m beat,” starts Ricky.

“Same,” says Jarez.

“You all should get some sleep,” I tell them, making it something more than a suggestion but less than an order. It’s been a long day for all of us, but they don’t seem to have indulged in the several-hour nap that I did. If Ricky’s crow’s feet get any deeper some officer is going to ask him where he found a bear that knew how to box. Nothing smaller would be able to lay a glove on him, except maybe Jacobs. I recall the way Jacobs took out the sentry earlier and feel the skin



at the nape of my neck tighten. I've done two of my three tours in the forest with Jacobs, but whatever that was he didn't learn it while I was around.

My men indicate their agreement, slinking off to the bathrooms tucked into the rear corners of the barracks to do whatever personal maintenance they want to before passing out for the night. I look at Chokey to see if he'll do the same. In spite of the deep lines beneath his own eyes, he brings out another of those cocky smiles.

"Don't look at me, Sergeant James, I napped awhile when you were asleep in the safe room." I find it troubling that I can't tell if the man is lying or not. If I can't tell if he's pulling my leg about getting a little sleep, how am I supposed to trust any information I manage to get out of him? He's probably just following orders and doing his best to make this whole situation less mysterious and tense. I can't expect him to risk a court martial just for the sake of my uneasy gut.

"I am looking at you, Private," a voice announces from the barracks' entrance. "Go and get some sleep," Sergeant Boru orders.

"I will keep Sergeant Kent company in your absence, I'm sure he could use some peace and quiet after all of your conversation." There is nothing in Boru's tone that suggests that comment is supposed to be pointed, yet a twitch can still be seen in the subordinate soldier's eye like he's been chewed out for not having his shit together.

"Yes, Sergeant," Chokey says, before turning on his heel and following my men to the latrines to get ready for some rack time.

"I apologize for my soldier's affable nature," Boru addresses me, "I had hoped he would set you at ease in your new setting, but he can be a lot to handle for extended lengths of time." It's my first time really listening to the spook sergeant talk, and his accent startles me.

“You speak like they do,” I say before I can exercise better judgement. If the man is insulted by my rudeness he doesn’t show it.

“Like the natives, yes,” he says, “You’ve doubtless noticed my resemblance too.” He passes a hand over his face, indicating the features that made him stand out to me when I first saw him. I offer a mute nod in confirmation and he continues, “Would you believe that I am actually *not* a native myself?”

“I would, but not without being told as much.”

“I grew up in a middle class suburb, stateside, but I was selected for language and culture training due to my ability to blend with the people here. It’s how I eventually ended up working for Colonel Taksa.”

“You guys do a lot of community outreach here? Winning the hearts and minds of the people?”

“Not so much, but I’m sure you’re aware that what we do here isn’t something we can discuss. Even if some of our less experienced soldiers have not adapted so well to that facet of our work yet.” He inclines his head in the direction of the latrines that Chokey disappeared inside of.

“You’re being awfully candid about all of this.” The sudden appearance and willingness to divulge information of the previously standoffish sergeant has me suspicious, and I see no reason not to share my discomfort with him. He must have been expecting it when he came in here to talk.

“I will admit that the colonel has allowed me to be more forthright with you, given our peculiar situation and your understanding that anything shared does not go beyond people on this base. Not about everything, but enough to make you more comfortable in the hopes it eases the

return of your memories. I think the psychiatrist at the medical facility may have recommended it.” He pauses, but I can tell he’s not done, just mulling over what he’s going to say next.

“And also,” he continues, “that some of my own . . . doubts about you have been assuaged with the corroborations of your own accounts of events.”

It’s not an admittance of accusation, but it feels like coming clean, a sort of peace offering. One I should accept, or at least appear to for now.

“Circumstances haven’t been ideal for trust on any side of this situation.” He nods his understanding of my intent.

“So what is it this base is for, if you’re allowed to tell me that now?” I ask him and he chuckles before responding. His laugh is low and throaty; it somehow fits with the man's shorter stature and earthier features. His stubble is pushing against regulation lengths, meaning that it’s visible, dark scruff on bark-toned skin. He really could pass for one of the people we’ve been trading lives with in this place for years, and that unsettles me regardless of his friendly uniform or suddenly affable demeanor. Not only does he look like one of them—and sound like one of them—but they themselves somehow resemble the forest we’re in. All of it compounds to make the back of my neck tingle, make my fingers itch for a weapon I’m not carrying.

“I believe the company line, so to speak, is that we are a forward-located ready force, capable of reacting to new information and circumstances within a timeframe of limited viability.” It does sound like a sales pitch from upper echelon brass, and exactly the sort of information he’d be permitted to tell me. A precise statement that says nothing at all even if it gets leaked. Still, the recognition that this base I’ve never heard of exists is more than I expected to be officially told, so that’s something.

“Well, my men and I certainly appreciate your reacting to our circumstances within the timeframe you did.”

“It was our pleasure to be able to help when we heard your radio transmission and happened to be in the area. Much like earlier today as it happens, only we had the numerical advantage on the enemy in your case, so there was no need for such a rapid retreat.”

“I’m amazed nobody talks about you, if you’re out here saving hides all the time.”

“It isn’t *all the time*,” he admits, giving me a look that’s one part chagrin and two parts coy. “As you’ve doubtless realized, we are quite deep in the forest, as the saying goes. Not a lot of saving that needs doing, and when there is, we don’t usually bring other units back here, we just say we’re from another base running ops in the area and send them on their way. You’re a special case.” In so far as evasive non-answers go, that one is pretty good. It’s sensible and there aren’t any loose threads for me to pick at without coming off as rude, so I drop the subject. It’s clear to me that a forester accent and precise dialect are not the only traits that Sergeant Boru picked up in his language training, the man knows how to steer a conversation.

“What’s it like living with the enemy?” I ask instead. Before answering, Boru motions for us to walk to the other side of the barracks, towards the entrance and away from our men who are starting to trickle out of the latrines and find their way into bunks. We walk through the open room, the striking of our combat boots making less noise than they seem like they should, and refusing to echo against the concrete walls of the structures interior. Boru and I take opposing seats on neighboring bunks, and I’m struck by the similarity of the positioning to how Chokey and I sat just hours ago. I take a sip of my now lukewarm beverage, the thin metal of its container doing little to insulate and trap the liquid’s initial warmth.

“It is terrifying in many ways,” he begins, “At first because you’re afraid of being found out, and that never fully goes away, but later also because it becomes difficult to continue seeing everyone as an enemy.”

“I find that difficult to believe.” I remember all of the friends I’ve watched die in the forest. How my platoon mates were slaughtered in that ambush earlier. I think of Pickmin in the medical facility alone except for the occasional medical staff. How injured is she if she had to remain in care longer than I did? I remember that panic I felt when I saw Jarez go down, unknowing that his vest caught the round. I remember my men listing names: Bradley, Gamble, Tyree, Kree, Brown, everyone in the lead vehicle. I’m hit with the sudden image of my lieutenant, body torn and charred, bloody lips cracked open as though mouthing words, pressing a black case into my hands. The image retreats to the back of my mind and leaves me shaken. Is that last image part of my memory, or is it just a conjuring of my damaged brain? It didn’t come to me like the other memories in that progressive, episodic fashion—I just have the one image.

“This is your third tour in the forest, Sergeant Kent,” Boru responds to my disbelief, unaware of the musings he interrupts. I nod, but it wasn’t a question, he’s read my service records.

“You’ve spent more of the last five years here than you have at home, in spite of your wife,” he continues.

“Maria understands, she knows this needs doing.” My tone is like the razor-wire on the perimeter fence outside: sharp and cutting, but only if you’re foolish enough to attempt passing through it. Boru takes the hint and makes a supplicating gesture.

“Of course, of course, our families are what give us the strength to do what we do. I only meant to say that in all that time away from home, all that time *here*, you’ve never experienced

the beauty in the forest or its less violent denizens?” If he’s studied my records as thoroughly as I expect he has then he already knows the answer to this, knows where this is going. Knowing and understanding aren’t the same, though.

“Once,” Is all I offer by way of response.

“Yes, I thought as much. A boy I believe, from the reports in your records.”

“Corie. And if you’ve read the associated reports you know how well that worked out.”

“Nothing in the reports indicated to me that what happened was Corie’s fault. He was a victim.”

“He was bait, and I fell for it.”

“Does that lessen the bond you built with him?”

“It wasn’t a bond. He was a kid I liked and gave trinkets to to build trust with an isolated village, I was following orders.” I’m regretting having opened this line of conversation. I should have known it would go in this direction, especially since he has access to my file.

“I have also read the files of your men. They mention the name he called you, Uupeng. Do you know what that word means?” When I neither answer nor shake my head he tells me, and I hang my head and press my eyes shut tight. I had always assumed it was a niche bit of slang for foreigner. I’d never thought of the boy as a brother before, and the knowledge that he had thought of me as such sharpens the edges of old and jagged feelings. Boru waits a long minute in silence while I compose myself. I can feel his eyes on the top of my head, but not the judgement I expect from the gaze. I’m grateful for that, and that I have my back to the bunks at the other end of the barracks where my men and Chokey sleep, or pretend to. The distance is not so much that they couldn’t catch pieces of our conversation if they strained, but we know when to give each other space. They may have listened to the beginning of this conversation, the part

where information may have been relevant, but for this they would have turned away, rustled their sheets or their blankets, and tried to nod off. I can hear Jarez snoring. Not much could be heard over that sawing noise.

“Regardless,” I say after my minute is passed, “Fraternizing with foresters only makes complications down the line.”

“Of course. I’m sure you thought that at the time as well. I only wanted to point out how unavoidable those connections can become sometimes. There are not many, I think, who would understand the precariousness of the situation I found myself in, but you might. The danger of empathizing.” Finally I meet his gaze, and it’s peculiar. There is an earnestness in his face, a longing for someone to understand, and a will for me to be that someone.

“It would be a difficult position to be placed in, I imagine. An unusual one as well, even for spec-ops,” I probe the subject with caution.

“Very unusual. It has given me a new appreciation for the situation here, as well as for certain elements of our command.” Is he inferring that he doesn’t support Colonel Taksa? The no-nonsense NCO is becoming an enigma. He’s driving this conversation, and I feel out of control, like I’m being led where he wants me to go, but I’m not sure what conclusions he wants me to draw. I feel like he’s suggesting that he isn’t a spook, or at least not the same kind of spook as everyone else on this base. The way he talks about the foresters though, his desire for me to understand him, the word he used for his feelings towards them: “empathize.” All of his other words this evening have been so particular, so specifically chosen. Is this a coincidence, or is he an empathizer to their cause? Is he trying to recruit me? He senses my unease.

“I should go and inspect the perimeter. I would invite you to join me, but we’re picky about who we allow to get a close look at any level of our defenses from the inside. You

understand. Get some sleep. Chokey informed me of your nap earlier, but you are still recovering, and we need that information in your head.” Was there emphasis when he said “we,” or did I imagine that? Maybe he’s right about the sleep. I look down at my still mostly full coffee tin and resolve to dump it down the drain in the latrine. Sleep will do more for me than stimulants. Boru departs, telling me to ask the guards at the door if I have questions or need anything beyond the barracks that night.

I perform my personal maintenance in something of a stupor, my conversation with the spook sergeant replaying in my head, mixing with feelings I thought I’d put behind me that were now dragged back to my conscious mind. I’m finishing up and finding a bunk that someone has left a nameplate on designating it as mine when spook soldiers begin to filter in. Apparently the base is out of the all-hands-on-deck phase of the earlier threat. Every one of the soldiers appears exhausted, but not one skips hygiene before falling into their own bunks. It’s another mark of their excellent discipline. While the extra few minutes of sleep might be good for them, and is certainly a powerful temptation, skipping hygiene after hours of sweat and tension that compound the general wear a body accumulates can lead to more severe issues in the future. Issues like that can cripple a soldier’s capabilities, which in turn damages his unit’s capabilities. Distracting myself with such observations allows my brain to slip back into sergeant mode, letting me escape my thoughts of the boy, of how Maria would have liked him, would have tried to convince me a kid of our own could be like him. Finally, the distraction from the spooks is enough for me to slip into a quiet and uneventful sleep.



## Chapter VII: Hang in there

I sleep through the night, waking only to the general bustling noises of the barracks coming to life in the morning. Of my own men, only Havcoff is already up. He's already dressed in one of our borrowed spook uniforms, boots bloused, face freshly shaved. Poor kid has it bad for Pickmin. He's checking himself over when he notices me looking.

"Morning, Sarge. I'm getting kind of used to this spook gear, maybe I'll throw my lot in to make the cut when we get back from this tour." We both chuckle at that. Havcoff is a bright kid, and well trained. If he decides he wants it badly enough I'm sure he can make it. I don't think he does though. The way he looks at Pickmin tells me he wants things in his life that a career as demanding as special operations makes difficult, even with a partner that's also enlisted.

"You do that, and I'll join you. We can drag Ricky with us." Havcoff and I both look over at Ricky for a thoughtful second before Havcoff states the obvious: "Sergeant, I'm not sure we can drag Ricky anywhere he doesn't want to go unless we get Jacobs and Jarez to help."

"Your mistake is dragging in the first place," says Jacobs sitting up in his bunk, "You just have to find the right motivation to get him moving." Jacobs slides his lean form out from the comfort of his sheets and pads over towards Ricky's sleeping bulk, snagging a canteen as he goes. When he's crept right up to the larger man's side he unscrews the cap on the hydration device and starts to tip it. Nobody stops him. After yesterday, and last night, we could all use a little play to lighten the mood. At least that's how I justify not intervening to the sergeant part of my brain.

Bit by bit the canteen tips. Ricky twitches when the first drop lands on the very tip of his nose and rolls down his face, then snorts when he inhales the next drop when it rolls into his right nostril. He's about to open his eyes when Jacobs upends the entire canteen. Ricky bolts out of bed, spluttering and wiping his eyes. Jacobs has already bolted for the latrines, tossing the canteen to an unsuspecting Havcoff. When Ricky finally clears his vision Havcoff is still standing there, red-faced from holding back laughter, with the empty canteen in his hands. Panicked, he looks over at me. I turn away and busy myself squaring away my own uniform, ignoring the sounds of struggle emanating from behind me, which I imagine are Ricky throttling our newest team member. I'm sure he'll leave him mostly intact. Perhaps more disheveled than Havcoff would like when we all go to check on Pickmin after chow.

I wonder where the food facilities are on this base. It's got to be one of the other few buildings I haven't been in yet. Maybe they're underground like the bunkers. The base is too established for its inhabitants to be surviving off of MREs alone, not for the amount of time they've been out here. Chokey said he was the newest, and that he'd been here a year.

As if summoned by my thoughts, the private appears at my side. He observes my men's antics with mild fascination, in a way that suggests he might be looking for indicators for whom he should place a bet on.

"Sergeant Boru told me to be the escort for you and your men again today," he says. *Escort* is an apt term for it. Applicable to VIPs and prisoners alike. While Boru and Chokey may be warming up to us, it's a reminder that we're still in a precarious position if only by virtue of the fact that anything we see on this base is classified above our clearance level.

"Would you mind *escorting* us to breakfast when my guys have their shit together?"

“Certainly, Sergeant. Will you be needing a replacement for your man there? He’s starting to turn a little purple.” Sure enough, Havcoff’s face is mottling from its position clamped in the crook of Ricky’s meaty arm.

“He’ll be fine,” Ricky chimes in, not giving any sign that it takes effort for him to subdue his smaller comrade. “I’m just helping Havcoff here get his blood back in the right head.”

“I think he’s got enough now.” I fix Ricky with a stern look, betrayed by the smirk around the corners of my mouth.

“You know what a pain it is to break in new guys.” I regret my comment after it’s out of my mouth. A poor choice of words with so many of our platoon going home in boxes. Neither Ricky nor Havcoff flinch, but their gaiety subsides. Ricky releases Havcoff, and the two set about getting prepped for the day. Havcoff straightens his uniform, taking some deep breaths while his face returns to its natural pallor. Ricky pulls a clean uniform on and laces up his boots, less concerned with the finer details of his appearance.

Jacobs peeks out of the latrine, and, seeing that the danger has passed, walks over to Jarez’s bunk to rouse the still slumbering soldier. After several minutes of ungentle coaxing and several more of shuffling about getting ready, Jarez is presentable enough that we can drag him along to breakfast with us.

“Is there anything we can do to keep busy while we’re here the next few days?” I ask Chokey while we walk. Downtime is healthy in moderation, but my men have already been restricted to a small space for several days while I was unconscious, and the prospect of subjecting them to that tedium for several more is unappealing. Too much time cooped up in their own heads, ruminating on what happened to their friends won’t be good for anyone, least of all them.

“I can run that by Sergeant Boru, and he can pass it up the line,” Chokey replies. “I’m sure we can find something for your guys to keep themselves occupied with. You, on the other hand, I think are going to be busy enough with the shrinks in the med facility. I have orders to take you by their offices after you’ve had time to check on your friend.”

“How is Pickmin doing?” Havcoff asks from where he walks behind us.

“I haven’t seen her myself, but Sergeant Boru mentioned in passing that she was recovering well. Probably better off than some of you at this point.” Chokey gives Ricky’s wounded arm a pointed glance. It didn’t seem to bother Ricky when he was roughhousing with Havcoff, but I notice in retrospect that he was careful to keep it tucked against his body and out of the way. Even now he cradles it just a little while we walk, causing his gait to be an unbalanced facsimile of its usual fluidity. Ricky notices me looking and nods that he’s okay. I take him at his word, unspoken though it is. Some men I’ve worked with in the past were the hardcore type that would never admit that an injury was slowing them down. It put their teammates at risk, but Ricky has never been like that. Contrary to what some might expect seeing how tense he gets in the field, Ricky has never tried to use an injury as an excuse not to go out either. So I trust his self-assessment. Military doctors do some amazing shit for us, and if they thought he was well enough to be up and about, and he’s already moving around without a sling or cast, the wound can’t be that bad. I can always check with one of them after we see Pickmin, we’ll be in the right building anyway. Just to be sure.

Reentering the building I woke up in is an unpleasant experience. Remembering once more all the times I’ve done this in the past, coupled with that vile antiseptic smell, is enough to make my head spin. The soldiers guarding the doors are more social this time, nodding to Chokey as we cross the threshold. I guess word got around that I might be trustworthy afterall.

It turns out that Pickmin's room is two doors down from mine in the opposite direction that Jacobs and I left after I was released. Had I known at the time, I may have insisted on checking on her then. Jacobs doesn't seem surprised by her room's proximity to mine when the desk clerk at the door reads it off for us. He was already standing like he was waiting for us to head down that hallway, almost expectant. I get a small shrug when I raise an eyebrow at him. Maybe he didn't tell me on purpose. The man has a way of getting to know more than he should. It makes me glad we're friends, but curious why he wouldn't want me to check on a fellow soldier when they were right there.

The short walk down the hallway feels longer with each step, the uncertainty of what state we'll find Pickmin in weighing each of us down. Just because someone is up for visitors doesn't mean that they aren't in a bad way, and seeing a friend like that has never gotten easier for me. When we make it to the door of her room, Chokey is the one to go in first. He's the only one who doesn't hesitate, and I envy him a little for that. For not having a connection to the person in the bed inside beyond being in the same military, and even that's tenuous in the case of the spook.

"I'll make sure she's awake," he says, before gliding through the door on silent feet. I guess all the training he got is good for something other than combat. His heavy boots don't make a sound as he slips through the space between the door and its frame. He opens it only far enough to allow a bare sliver of light to pass between himself and the door, preserving the dim sanctum of the room's interior. Somehow, the fact that he doesn't knock seems considerate rather than rude.

It's only a second before Chokey swings the door wider and motions us inside. We enter, and he closes the door behind us. The room is the same bare bones set-up as my own had been

just yesterday morning, but I barely take it in. My attention goes to Pickmin who is reclined in the lone bed. Her dark hair is loose, uncharacteristic given that regulations require it to be bound up most of the time. It spreads out across the pillow, framing a face that's at least half bruises—what's visible beneath the bandaging around her forehead and right temple, that is. The covers are pulled up to her armpits, and the gown she's wearing reveals that her right arm is in a cast. From the bulk beneath the robe on the same shoulder it looks like it has considerable wrapping encapsulating it as well.

“What happened to her?” I hear Jarez whisper.

“One of the docs told me she got thrown into a tree by an explosion,” Jacobs replies with equal quietness.

“I can hear you, assholes,” Pickmin says, but she keeps her eyes shut.

“How you doing, Picker?” Jacobs asks her.

“Well enough to get up and kick your ass if you keep calling me that, dick.”

“Careful of that language P-F-C, you're in the presence of an NCO.” He glances at me with significance as though I'm going to back him up. I seriously consider smacking him in the back of the head, but assaulting my men won't do any wonders for my career so I restrain myself.

“Glad to see you made it through the shit, Private,” I say to Pickmin instead. She's new this tour, not as new as Havcoff, but close. Maybe that has something to do with why he's so smitten with her.

“This happens again and I might as well become a plumber and get paid what I'm worth/” She's wincing every couple of words, the pain from the bruising around her jaw being

exacerbated by what's probably the most movement it's had in days. Staff around here aren't exactly the chatty types.

"So how bad were you hurt?" Havcoff asks her, "You look good now!"

"You're sweet," she tells him, but I can tell from the waver in Havcoff's smile that the words don't carry the inflection he was hoping for.

"Forearm fracture, dislocated shoulder, and concussion." She goes on, "Apparently a bad enough concussion to keep me locked up in here."

"You got any memory loss like the sarge here?" Jarez slaps me on the back.

"No, what's wrong with you, Sergeant?"

"Just a little banged up, it's all sorting out, concentrate on your own recovery, Private, I have enough to worry about being cooped up with these guys here for the next few days. The sooner you're up and about, the sooner I'll have someone approaching normal to talk to again."

"Right away, Sarge." She tries for a mock salute, but is too impeded by the cast on her arm to raise her hand to her brow.

"Sergeant," Chokey says from the doorway, "The doc wants to see you down the hall." I nod at him, placing my hand on the rail running across the foot of Pickmin's bunk in what's meant to be a comforting gesture that doesn't cross the line of intimate contact with my junior enlisted. I think I catch Jacobs rolling his eyes when I turn away and nobody else is looking at him. Nevertheless Pickmin nods like she understands, and I walk out the door without looking back at the men I'm responsible for as they huddle around their wounded friend.

I can hear them trade jokes and chuckle while I walk down the hallway, but I do my best to tune out the specifics. I'd like nothing better than to stay with them, or even better to take them all home. Real home, away from this forest and its inhabitants who want us dead and gone.

They're like little siblings to me, the men under my command. I take them with me, try to keep them safe, but still have to keep watching them get hurt. Even Pickmin, who's not part of our squad, not part of that family, is one of us right now. Isolated as she is from those she's closest to, my men have taken their friendship with her and turned it into something more protective.

"I can't help but feel like it's my fault," I say to Chokey when we're out of earshot of the others, having just rounded a corner in the hallway.

"Pickmin getting hurt? Don't be ridiculous, Sergeant James, that's no one's fault but the fuckin' termites that tried to kill her." The venom in Chokey's voice surprises me, and reminds me in a new way how little I know him. I've grown to like him a considerable amount in the day or so I've known him, and in that time I've had to keep reminding myself that he's a spook, that I don't know his motives, or his character. Now I remember that he's human too, with his own history, and I don't know that either. Rather than correcting his misconception that it's Pickmin's injuries I feel responsible for, not my men's prolonged separation from everything they've become familiar with in this foreign place, I ask my new friend something else entirely.

"Why are you here, Chokey?" I leave his rank off intentionally, not wanting him to feel like the question is one he's being ordered to answer.

"This is where the brass ordered me to be, Sarge, same as you," he winks sideways at me.

"I mean why did you join up, go through all that training, just to come out here?" He looks thoughtful for a minute, as though he's never considered the answer to that question himself.

"Tell you what, Sergeant," he says to me, "You get your head on straight and all this mess behind us, and the next time we're both in a country that doesn't want us dead we can get a beer together." He smiles like there's a joke I'm not getting, and then stops walking to knock on



a closed door we've come level with. The door opens almost instantly to reveal one of the most generic looking men I've ever seen. White lab coat and scrubs like all other doctors, ID badge over his breast reading "Dr. Luther Kingston, M.D." He's older, balding, with a laurel of blonde-grey hair and pale skin from too much time indoors, and wearing tinted glasses that are supposed to reduce eye-strain from blue light. The wrinkles around his eyes as he squints up at me suggest the glasses are either a new acquisition or are not doing their job very well.

"This is him?" he asks. The question appears to have been rhetorical because he ushers me into the room without waiting for a response from Chokey, who he leaves outside when he shuts the door.

"Nice to meet you, I am Dr. Kingston, although you'll probably just call me 'Doc,' everyone around here seems to." He has a funny way of speaking, rushing to get a few words out at a time and then pausing like he's considering the next few, but not pausing in any predictable place in his sentence. It's unbalancing and he's moving on before I can get any sort of reply out.

"I'm the psychiatrist on staff at this, uh, 'facility.'" He makes quotation marks around the word with his fingers and pulls an exaggerated expression like he's made a joke we're both in on. "As you've probably figured out, I'm not military like everyone else here, but the, hm, Colonel Taksa feels it's helpful to have me on hand to deal with the, ahem, *par-tic-u-lar* necessities of this facility's inhabitants."

"Particular necessities?" I manage to interject before he continues with his monologue.

"Yes, well, as you've seen in your time here, this facility is atypical, and brings atypical stresses on the, um, soldiers here. Anyway, that's as much as I'm really supposed to say about that. We're here to talk about you, your...*condition*." He snatches the tinted glasses from his face

and stows them in the pocket his ID badge is hooked to, then scrutinizes my face, eyes flickering around my features.

“Your wounds seem to have healed nicely,” he observes. He raises his hands and hovers them over my face, his expression asking for permission. When I don’t object he ghosts them across my face and scalp, checking my various scrapes and contusions. I don’t think I flinch, yet he still seems to be able to tell which ones are more sensitive than others.

“I’ve heard from the colonel everything you’ve remembered, but I’d like to hear it from you in person if you don’t mind.” In a civilian setting that would be a request, but here with the weight of the colonel’s rank behind him I don’t have an option but to go through everything I remember again, so I do. It takes longer with Dr. Kingston than it did with the colonel. He interrupts me every few sentences to ask me about details that wouldn’t matter in a military debriefing. What was the state of my men’s uniforms in the vehicle before the attack? Details about trees. Aspects I wouldn’t think mattered at all, but which he takes notes on.

“Well,” he says when I’m done, “It would have been best if you hadn’t revisited the sight of your trauma, but the colonel insisted. You military types can be so impatient, and he is not always the most understanding of men. Have you been getting any headaches, blurred vision, ringing in your ears?” The abrupt shift in the line of questioning catches me off guard. The pace of this man’s brain is difficult to keep up with.

“Slight headaches, I guess. No blurred vision. Ringing too, but that’s been around since I was too close to a flashbang detonation a year or two ago.”

“How close?”

“Excuse me . . . Doctor?” I belatedly add the title after correcting my instinct to call him “Sir.”

“How close to the ‘flashbang’ grenade were you when it detonated?”

“I don’t remember exactly. Is that relevant?”

“Prior history of traumatic brain injury could be, yes. One isn’t listed recently on your records, but you would not be the first soldier I’ve met who was disinclined to report an injury. Are there any other events that might have caused damage to your brain that you can think of that aren’t on your file? Anything prior to your enlistment that you might not have reported to get past medical tests faster? I won’t tell, but I need to know.”

I think back to my childhood, and then to my enlistment process, hesitating to answer. Even if the doctor is as good as his word, that doesn’t mean the information won’t get out some other way. It’s been years, though, and the military is unlikely to drum me out for leaving something off the medical questionnaire this much later. I’ll get a slap on the wrist at most.

“I did get one concussion. A little under two years before I signed on.”

“Do you remember if your doctors at the time indicated the severity of the injury?”

“No.” It’s been almost a decade since it happened, I haven’t thought about that time in longer than I can remember, ironically. Dr. Kingston makes thoughtful noises for a moment; then, when he’s done hemming and hawing, moves on again.

“It’s possible you don’t *want* to remember. Our subconscious can black out particularly traumatic events, or sometimes even things that conflict with our paradigms.”

“Paradigms?” I’m not sure if the man is talking to me or himself now, he’s starting to mumble rather than speak, the words running together into a sort of verbal slush that I’m only catching every few words of.

“Ingrained perceptions of reality,” is the only response I get, and I’m not sure what to make of it. My prolonged silence and furrowed brow seem to get his attention, but only after a

full minute of mute staring into the corner by the closed door on his part. When he does speak it's in a new direction again.

“Have you ever tried meditation, Sergeant Kent?” Meditation? I've seen Ricky do it sometimes, when he's managed to find a quiet moment away from Jacobs back at our assigned base. Havcoff even tried it with him a few times, but he always stopped within a few minutes saying it was harder than it looked. It didn't look very hard when Ricky did it; he just sat there.

“No, I can't say I've ever even thought about it much.”

“Well, here's the deal, Sergeant, I can prescribe you a cocktail of drugs that might help but come with all sorts of undesirable side-effects, or we can give meditation a shot. It's been shown to be helpful in a number of studies, and if it doesn't work, we can always go back to option one.”

“How long will it take if I try the meditation?” I'm not enthusiastic about drugs, but my men and I need to get out of this base and back to the rest of our platoon.

“Normally, I'd say give it weeks or more, but the colonel has made his desire for a timely resolution to this issue known, and I get the feeling you are of similar mind. Given how much you've already remembered so soon, I have a cautious hope that even a couple days could be helpful.”

“And how long would the drugs take?”

“Likely about the same amount of time just to get into your system and working, so possibly another day beyond that. That's the fastest I've seen any evidence of in my experience.”

“There's not a fast way? I feel like I'm so close already.”

“Depending on who you believe, hypnosis has shown some results, but as far as I know we don't have anyone in the facility trained to perform it. I only have a theoretical knowledge of

meditation myself, and I was only able to convince the colonel that it's a viable option by telling him that the fewer substances in your system the more likely your rememberings are to be accurate."

"Is that your way of telling me that 'both' isn't an option?"

"Oh, both is certainly an option, but I should warn you that sometimes the side-effects will kick in before the medication actually starts to help."

"And what are these side-effects, exactly?"

"There's a variety. Most common ones are headaches, dizziness, blurred vision," he goes on listing the side-effects, putting up fingers one by one until he realizes that he's run out of digits and isn't done. He puts them down again, cheeks showing the barest hint of pinkness like he's embarrassed to be offering a solution with so many drawbacks.

"It's uncommon for more than a few to occur in one subject—patient," he rushes to correct his word choice, "however the risks for any or all of them are present." He looks at the floor between us, not meeting my eyes in such a way that suggests the risks may be more present than I should be comfortable with.

"I'll try the meditation." I'm aiming for dry but my voice falls too flat even for that, and the tone I use is closer to nervousness than I'd like. Dr. Kingston produces a list of breathing exercises and a basic how-to guide for meditation from his desk and reads through it with me. It seems straight-forward. The disillusionment of the mysticism around a practice I'd heard described as an "ancient art" causes the faint light of hope I have for this actually working to flicker. I resolve to find something for Jacobs to do elsewhere and then ask Ricky for help.

My meeting with Dr. Kingston doesn't last much longer and ends with him ushering me out the door and saying that he'll see me again soon. When I step out into the hallway I'm surprised to find Sergeant Boru has taken Chokey's position outside the door.

"Good morning, Sergeant Kent," he greets me.

"Good morning, Sergeant Boru. Has my escort status been upgraded today?" The corners of his eyes crinkle in what I think is amusement, and he motions for us to begin walking down the hall towards the building's exit. I'm disappointed that I won't be getting to go check in on Pickmin again, given the brevity of my visit, but I chastise myself for it. She needs rest, not me hovering. It's better for her to be surrounded by her fellow junior enlisted. No need for rank to overstay its welcome, especially mine.

"The colonel has recognized that too much time stuck in the barracks could be—" He pauses to find the right word. "—counterproductive to our ends. He's given you access to our training facilities, your men are already there, *guided* by Pvt. Chokey." He puts emphasis on his replacement for the word "escorted."

Training facilities? I think about all the buildings I've seen on base so far, and none of them are large, certainly not large enough for a company of spooks to train in. It must be some sort of small gym. Unusual to have on a forward-operating base, but I suppose it's another perk of being a spook.

"Please let the colonel know I appreciate that, Sergeant. I think some time on a treadmill will help to clear my head."

"In that case I must apologize in advance, we do not have a treadmill in our training area, or anywhere on this base." No treadmill? This must be one hell of a tiny gym. Still, even if it's

just some floor matts and free-weights it will do my men and me good to have somewhere other than the barracks to be.

## Chapter VIII: Maintain the initiative

Sergeant Boru did not lie to me, there is not a treadmill in the training area. He did fail to notify me that the training area took up the entirety of the space beneath the base that wasn't occupied by the administration building's underground bunker. In addition to the small gymnasium I expected, there is a system of rooms with pop-up targets so that the spooks can train in urban environments. The reason for the lack of treadmills is the tunnel system that snakes around the outskirts of the base, about three meters in from the perimeter fence.

Boru tells me that the underground tunnels and rooms were originally the entirety of the base, and the outer reaches of the relatively large underground network allowed soldiers to pop up from unanticipated locations if an enemy force was in the area. Now that the operation has grown beyond what could be hidden underground, they've been repurposed to a safe location for the soldiers to train. He assures me everything is sound-proof.

"So the constant gunfire won't draw more attention than is absolutely necessary," he tells me. When I point out that there is no way that the termites don't know this base is here, in their own forest, Boru shrugs.

"There is a difference between sitting in a tree and watching an angry bear, and sitting in a tree and throwing pinecones at an angry bear. In either situation the bear *can* get to you, but one is far more inclined to."

I reason this is probably the same line of logic that keeps the base blacked out at night in spite of the fact the enemy is technologically sophisticated enough to detect it anyway.

"What stops them from coming in here and wiping you out, though? You're well-equipped, yeah, but you're so far away from support there's no way you could hold up if they



really came at you,” I insist. The stoic sergeant looks ahead down the tunnel we’re walking in. According to a spook soldier who was dripping with sweat from his workout, Chokey is leading my men through laps around the tunnel system, so Sergeant Boru and I meander along the same periphery tunnels until they make their way around to lap us again. It’s giving me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the underground system. Although the base itself isn’t large, the tunnels are narrow enough that two people passing will bump shoulders if they aren’t careful, and there are enough of them that turn or wind back on themselves that I’m already turned around enough to be lost. From a strategic standpoint it makes sense: if enemies are in the tunnels they’ll be lost and vulnerable to the more knowledgeable defending soldiers. It’s also a good opportunity for me to press the other sergeant with questions since there are no distractions.

“Let’s turn here,” Boru says without answering my latest query. We make a right-angle turn down another identical tunnel. I would swear it leads even further to the periphery, but I’m so lost in the maze it could just as easily lead back to the gym area that’s beneath the entrance.

“Isn’t this off the running path? How will we link up with the others?”

“As their sergeant you should be familiar with the lay of the land as much as you’re able. They can show you the running route later. They won’t forget it after today. Pvt. Chokey will have them on it till they hate him.” Boru laughs, but from my position half a step behind him now, I can tell his shoulders don’t move with the motion they way they would if it were a genuine reaction to the humor. Without any discernible cause, Boru spins towards me and grabs my shoulders. He holds my gaze.

“I need you to remember. Get off your ass.” As fast as it happened he’s turning away again. One inexplicable finger to his lips that’s returned to his side by the time he’s taken his

next step. When Boru realizes I've stopped walking and sees the stunned look on my face he motions me after him.

"Come on, this tunnel doesn't go much further, but you should see how the exits are." I manage to get myself moving again, somehow restraining the myriad questions his peculiar outburst roused. Whatever it was, the man doesn't seem keen on revisiting it. He acts like nothing happened while showing me the portals to the surface. Each portal is a circular hatch that opens upward, camouflaged on the exterior. Two even narrower tunnels lead to each in a wedge formation so that any invading combatant who manages to get down the ladder will have to cover two angles on their own. If there are defending soldiers at the other end of both connected tunnels it would be almost impossible.

The spook sergeant continues giving me a tour of the tunnels, conducting himself in a manner wholly inconsistent with a man who just assaulted me with a demand to get off my ass and remember. It's so surreal I would almost believe it was all in my imagination, a symptom of whatever trauma took my memories from me just a few days ago. I would believe that, except that his outburst feeds into that persistent feeling I've had since waking up in this spook base. That *offness*, the one that won't go away no matter how I grow to enjoy Chokey's company, or how Boru has begun to show me the human side of himself. The other spec-ops, spooks, whatever and whoever they are, haven't opened up in the same way. The camaraderie inherent to us combat grunts isn't there with them. Also, there is the timing of the outburst: a split second in an isolated tunnel, and then back to normal. Perhaps it's not that Boru won't explain, it's that he can't. Jacobs' initial warning that we're being watched is corroborated in this, but perhaps it's so much more invasive than even he had expected.

I rack my brain to remember if my men and I have said anything we shouldn't have, given any indication that we were anything but faithful to the goals Colonel Taksa has set out. What could we have said, though? It's obvious we'd be distrustful, that we just want to return home. Spooks or not, we're all still one army, and this group has saved us on more than one occasion now. So why is Boru so secretive?

*I.* The realization hits me that Boru said, "*I* need you to remember," not, "*We* need you to remember." Suddenly his odd perspective on the natives is making more sense, his insistence that this place isn't all bad, that I remember something good about it.

I observe his profile, slightly ahead of me in the narrow confines of the tunnels. He looks forward, still talking while I make noises of confirmation to show I'm still engaged with his conversation. I see again how similar he looks to the natives. He spent time with them, not just around them but *with* them. He even admitted himself that doing so blurred the lines of friend and foe, didn't he?

It explained everything. Even how this base hadn't been overrun so far removed from any form of reinforcement. What better place for a mole than in a highly classified special operations unit on a base so secret that all of the communications are still run on a closed circuit. There's no other way the enemy could get information from this base unless they wanted to pay the price of assaulting such a reinforced position, which would be steep. The only question left is why Boru thinks he can turn me? Is it desperation, or is it something I'm not remembering?

"Sergeant," Chokey's voice calls from behind us, causing both Boru and me to turn in response. Even at a full jog, Chokey managed to sneak up on me in the confines of the concrete-floored tunnel system. A second after turning I can make out the clatter of footfalls coming from farther back in the tunnel, multiple boots in a disjointed chorus of jogging paces. Chokey is

already standing next to me, breathing easily, when my men come around the last corner before our position. All of them are red-faced and panting. Whatever Chokey put them through, it's worn them down harder than I've seen them in our time here.

"Sergeant," Jarez says between gasps for air, "I'd like to recommend Pvt. Chokey for a psych eval. The man is psychotic." Chokey laughs, clapping my out-of-breath subordinate on the shoulder hard enough that he stumbles, or perhaps it wasn't that hard and Jarez is just that close to passing out on his own.

"Your men aren't half bad, Sergeant Kent," Chokey says, using my proper rank and name in the presence of his commanding NCO. "They kept up with the pace I set through most of my first circuit."

"How many circuits do you normally do?" Havcoff asks from his position leaning against the tunnel wall.

"Private, it's not nice to tease your brothers in arms," Sergeant Boru chides Chokey, but I suspect he's amused by the antics himself, as I might be myself if I didn't have so much on my mind. I force an expression of mock-disappointment and direct it to my exhausted men.

"You all are really going to let a private that's been pampered with so many nice things run you into the ground like that? Clearly I need to step up your training when we get back to our base. Maybe have Sergeant Boru show me some of these circuits that seem to have worked so well for Pvt. Chokey." There are groans and low-hanging heads from each of them. I catch Ricky shooting Jacobs a side-long glance, though. They, at least, have realized something else has my attention. They won't say anything to the others until I do, but I'm not sure how to communicate to any of them my suspicions. I haven't seen an officer other than the colonel since arriving at this base, which is unusual enough in itself, especially with the number of soldiers stationed here,

but it also leaves me unsure of how much access Boru has to the system of electronic ears I'm ever more certain are listening. How much can I share safely?

"I would be happy to, Sergeant Kent. Our men have had their workout already, perhaps now it's our turn?" Boru says to me, and from the sudden twinkle in his eye I get the feeling I've made a terrible mistake with my absent-minded joke.

Boru and Chokey lead us all back to the gym area of the underground system at a casual walk, giving my men a chance to regain their composure, and my stomach a chance to sink into my feet every time I see Chokey's gleeful glances in my direction. Jarez might be right about the man being a psychopath, which does nothing to assuage my dread for whatever workout his sergeant is about to put me through. I like to think I'm in pretty good shape, even for the combat arms portion of the military, but my men are all at about the same point and at least a year or more younger than I am. If Chokey managed to wipe the floor with them so thoroughly, I don't like my odds at keeping up, especially with an audience.

Once we're in the gym area, I'm led onto a matted area while my men are led along the wall to take seats. Their smugness is dampened when Chokey insists they do wall sits while they watch. I can tell they're looking forward to what's coming despite the added effort they'll have to undergo while they spectate.

Boru starts with the standard series of warmups for all army workouts, jogs, skips, crunches, and stretches loosening our cold muscles. The familiarity of the routine is comforting. I'm set at ease the more my muscles warm up, and it alleviates some of the soreness I've felt setting into my body as it readjusts to movement after the days in bed followed by the high-adrenaline outing to the place of the ambush. That ease and comfort evaporates when the stretching starts.

All recommended army workout routines involve some stretching. It prevents injury in both the short and long term, and is generally the gentlest and most enjoyable aspect of an army-adopted workout. Not with Boru. He “facilitates” bends and stretches I had never considered the human body capable of before, bracing his feet against my body and using his own weight to pull me in directions my anatomy objects to. It feels like he’s trying to fold me in half in every direction. Five minutes in I can feel my shirt starting to dampen with sweat. At ten minutes, I assert that deblousing might be advantageous for the stretches, and Boru agrees. We remove our outer uniform tops, and it is revealed that Boru is not sweating at all yet, while I am starting to soak through the underarms of my drab-green t-shirt.

When we started the workout I thought it would be strange to be physically engaged with the man I had just been considering to be an enemy spy. All such thoughts have been flushed from my mind by the end of the stretching, and I’m just struggling not to embarrass myself in front of the others. When I glance over though, it seems Chokey hasn’t let any of them rest from their position doing wall sits, and they’re starting to sweat and shake a little themselves.

“Feeling limber, Sergeant Kent?” Boru asks me after I’ve managed to complete a minute-long hold of what I’m sure is a mis-executed version of whatever pretzel shape I’m supposed to be contorting myself into.

“As a gazelle,” I reply, letting my back fall against the mats. A thud from my periphery signals that one of my men has finally hit their failing point in Chokey’s marathon spectator wall-sit. The accompanying groan tells me it’s Havcof. Seemingly content to not be the first one to fail, Jarez follows suit, leaving Jacobs and Ricky in position with their unfazed exercise leader.

“Excellent,” Boru says, “Let’s move on to the real work then.” The “real work,” as the other sergeant put it, begins with sprinting the circumference of the tunnel system three times. I still can’t find my way around the subterranean labyrinth, and I get the distinct impression that if I let Boru escape my sight that I will be left wandering around them until I find my way back to him. My breath is ragged from the experience when we move on to doing ground drills along the same path. Low crawl, high crawl, dash-and-drop, repeat, repeat, repeat. My shirt is stuck to me, sweat rolls in thick beads down my shaved scalp, my combat boots are tungsten anchors attached to my ankles. Chokey and the others follow at a half-jog behind us. My exhausted men are unwilling to miss out on the spectacle, even if it means they have to keep moving with us. I take solace in the fact that Boru is sweating too now. He’s not the sopping ball of wet uniform that I’m becoming, but his neck shines in the harsh, direct lighting of the tunnels.

When I’ve reached the point my hands are shaking, I look up to see that I’ve been brought to the breach-and-clear rooms. Standing from my high-crawl position, Boru hands me a plate carrier, already containing the heavy bullet-resistant composite plate. It takes me two tries to get the fasteners tightened to the proper degree, and my heart rate has barely reduced when I’m handed a loaded carbine, a holster complete with side-arm, and brand new night-vision goggles.

In an act of what might have been mercy, Boru goes through the rooms first while the rest of us watch via a camera system that provides multiple angles for every room. All the better to analyze every movement, every mistake the elite soldiers make. If Boru makes any, I don’t see them. I check Chokey’s face periodically, but he’s adopted the same impassivity that I’ve come to expect of the other spooks. His eyes are bright, though, absorbing data from his sergeant that I don’t have the training to see. I wonder if Chokey’s claim about being “that much better” than

the other soldiers here extends to Boru. Boru must have years of experience on his subordinate, experience no amount of training can replicate. The spook NCO executes the targets in each room with a terrifying efficiency, never touching the targets marked as non-combatants, always leaving two holes in the center of the enemy cutouts.

I ask Chokey how many times Boru has run through the course while it's been set up with the current layout. Chokey tells me the layout is changed by a different squad every morning. The number of targets is different each time, there are different obstacles, the targets have different designs which get changed, even the interior walls are movable. Sometimes, Chokey tells me, a team will leave a setup exactly the way it is except for one target, just to see how much it throws off each soldier when they reach it. It gets everyone at least a little bit apparently. If it results in a non-combatant target being shot, the shooter will practice the run all night and pull double duty the next day. They make sure it happens to each soldier at least once, sometimes changing the targets between runs without telling them. The first time it happens to a new soldier, Boru will stay up through the night with them, alternating with the other soldier to change the targets and do the runs himself. Chokey tells me all this, and then tells me he's never heard of anybody seeing the sergeant shoot a non-combatant target. Not even when the entire unit conspired to change the course between every runthrough Boru did for an entire month. Chokey admits he's hit two non-combatant targets in the year he's been there, which is apparently one higher than the average amount in that time. I wonder at his claim to being better than the others in the face of this statistic, but not as much as I wonder about the speed at which Boru recognizes targets.

Unbidden, the memory of the boy returns. Perhaps it was Boru's questions bringing the past so close to the surface, or perhaps it was just never as buried as I wanted it to be. I push it



back down, but suddenly the layout of the rooms is more familiar, seeing them through the cameras. Then they aren't through the cameras anymore. Boru's finished his run and I'm entering the ready area, weapons in hand, live rounds in their magazines, safeties off. It's like seeing two rooms in front of me. They aren't exactly the same, that would be impossible. They're close enough though. My brain, exhausted as it is from the strenuous aerobic and anaerobic exercise it's been through, isn't quibbling about the specific dimensions, it doesn't care about the different furniture, or the number of targets. It's close *enough*.

I enter alone. My team is elsewhere, cut off from the building by sniper fire in one of the forest's urbanized zones. I'm alone, my adrenaline pumping. I was trained to work as part of a team, to work together to overcome enemy forces. I can't cover all the angles with just my two eyes and one weapon. I move forward, sweeping right to left as I enter the first room in from the hallway. The door opens inwards and I have my shoulder against it, guiding it open and using it for visual cover, but it won't stop bullets. I see two men, both with the termites' longer weapons nearby but not in-hand. One looks up and cries out, both go for the rifles, both die.

No, there are three enemy targets in this room, black silhouettes stark against the white wall behind them. I put two rounds into the third target as well, continuing my sweep left. One more target in the far corner of the room, it gets the same two rounds as the other three, even as my legs take me forwards. There wasn't a third man in the room, though, he came later, rushing at me through the doorway. I jerk my carbine towards him, pull the trigger. Except, I don't pull the trigger, because there is no cutout target in the doorway. No dead man falling against the frame that I have to step over, careful not to trip but unable to take my eyes off of the expanding angle of danger in front of me. I feel my body take that exaggerated step over the lifeless legs,

feel the part of my brain that's been shoved into the background note the coppery scent already starting to permeate the air.

There is no door in the threshold to the next room, just the frame. I have no sort of cover, nothing between me and the enemy. Enemies. There are two in this room as well, standing at far corners, one turned away, slow on the uptake or too far to grab his rifle quickly, my lizard brain deems he's the less threat, the other man, other target, already holding a sidearm. A bullet rips into the wood by my face, peppering me with splintery shrapnel which will sting later but only registers as a stimulant now. I whip the barrel of my weapon over to him, firing three panicked shots, one misses, the second smacks into the enemy's shoulder before the third finds centermass. I'm already moving, reversing the momentum of my turn to bring my sights back around to the enemy on my right, the one now bringing his own weapon to bear on me. I'm faster, and he dies too.

There's two more targets on my left though, targets I ignored because they weren't in the room, they weren't men, weren't enemies. I swing back to the left again, putting two rounds in one target, barely stopping myself from doing the same to the other when I realize it's a non-combatant. There were no non-combatants in that room, only enemies.

I don't remember how many rooms I went through when I was separated from my squad then, and I don't remember how many rooms are in the urban combat exercise now. I just see the next room. No door on this one either. Move, enter, kill, move. Combatant, hit, hit again, combatant, hit-hit. Non-combatant? Female, curled up, crying. Not moving towards any weapons. Leave her.

Move. Doorway, with door. It's shut. Locked. Shouting from behind, Forester lingo. Too many voices, no way back. I can *feel* someone on the other side of the door. They're in there,

waiting. Going to pinch me from both sides. Maintain initiative. Breach, kick the door in. Boot connects close to the lock, splintering the cheap wood. Two men, enemies—targets?—on the right, bang-bang, bang-bang, both dead. Noise to my left, blur in my periphery, rotate, fire, bang-bang. Stop. It's a non-combatant. It's him, the boy. He's bleeding. I shot him.

I freeze with the realization, with the image. The boy is slumped against the wall, eyes locked up at me in surprised recognition, blood seeping from the two holes I just put in his sternum. I'm immobile, and the rounds from the forester rifle smack into my back, not penetrating my vest, but still creating blossoms of fiery pain in my ribs. I crash forward as the inertia of the rounds traveling at hundreds of meters per second encounters the immobile surface of my person. I'm still watching the boy as legs ending in heavy boots flow around me. I have blood leaking out of the corner of my mouth, I've bitten through my cheek and my tongue when I fell. I can't breathe from the pain, vision going black around the sides. They must think I'm dead.

There's a window, and through it the sounds of combat make their way to my ears. My squad, my comrades are out there, fighting, close. I can hear the men shouting for something, urgency in their voice, another pair of legs crosses in front of me. I can't look away from the boy's eyes. There's so much betrayal in them. My brain is silent, unthinking, or maybe it's screaming so loudly I can't hear my own thoughts. The pain. My ribs. The boy. The whoosh.

The trained part of me, the animal instinct that recognizes danger cries out that a Forester hand-launched rocket has just been fired nearby. Less than one of my pounding heartbeats later the deafening explosion follows. It doesn't deafen me, but in the absence of the familiar cracks of friendly rifles that follow I feel so cut off from the world that it might as well have. The screaming in my head quiets enough that a single realization breaks through, a lone radiowave in

a sea of white static. It's my fault. I froze. I saw the boy and I froze, and it killed my brothers. *I've* killed my brothers.

The screaming in my head rushes back in. No, it's not in my head, it's around me. The men who launched the rocket leave the room, but their legs are replaced by others, the new legs in familiar camouflage. The screaming is shouting, words coalesce out of the static and the image shatters back to reality.

I'm collapsed against the wall of the last room in the urban combat exercise. Ricky is shouting my name, big hands pinning me against the wall by my shoulders. Carbine on the floor nearby, bolt locked back in the empty position. I look up at Ricky, see the concern in his eyes, but can't hold his gaze. Instead, my head drifts to the side, through the fog of confusion, landing on the room's lone non-combatant target. It's child-sized. It's exactly where the boy was. This room *is* exactly as that room was, not just a poor facsimile enhanced by my mind's own cracked reminiscences.

That's when I find Sergeant Boru's face, the knowing sadness there. The bastard. Chokey is next to him, worry and bemusement etching unfamiliar lines onto a face that seems made for auspicious laughter.

"I'm okay," I say, and then again, "I'm okay," reaching up to clasp Ricky's hand where it rests against my shoulder. Nobody in the room is convinced, but all of them think they understand. I look at my men, one by one, willing them to know that I'm fine, that their sergeant hasn't lost it. Their trust is my everything, even if I don't deserve it.

Letting go of Ricky's hand I shove off the wall and back to my feet, bending over to collect and safety the weapon I let fall earlier. Contemplating whether or not to ask them not to say anything about this later, I figure it's better not to. It is not the responsibility of my men to

keep my secrets, and would only undermine their faith in me if I asked it of them. As for the spooks in the room, Chokey might want to follow the request, and Boru, as a sergeant and the man with the most military experience in the room, might understand it better than the others, but they're spooks. They will do what they're trained to do, and the stakes for them, with all their training and clearance and secrets, are higher than they are for the rest of them. With all the cameras in this room someone else has probably already seen it anyway.

As we make our way out of the room, I can't help but look back one more time at the child target and the two dark holes in its center. Clenching my jaw I turn away and wonder just what it is Boru got out of this. Even assuming he's working against us, a suspicion of which I have little evidence but substantial expectation at this point, what could he gain from rattling me this way? Pondering the question is an escape from the jagged shards of memory cutting into my conscious thoughts, and I take hold of the proverbial lifeline in the hopes it drags me back to normality.

I'm racking my brain to remember everything I can about psychological operations and none of it is adding up to the current situation. It can't be helpful to disturb an already traumatized brain further, can it? Somehow, thinking of my brain as separate from myself, from who I am, makes it easier to think the word "traumatized" in relation to my own person. I don't *feel* traumatized, just angry. Angry at Boru, angry at Colonel Taksa and the Army, angry at myself. So angry that when Boru stops in front of me I walk into him and my first instinct is to shove him. I bury the impulse, and am opening my mouth to let out a few choice words instead when I realize we've just walked outside to find ourselves standing in a semi-circle of armed spooks, weapons pointed in our direction. At a glacial pace, I bring my hands up and away from the unloaded carbine still slung across my back, and the sidearm strapped to my hip. I hadn't

even thought about them after leaving the room, but supposed we were on our way to check them back into the armory.

“Sergeant, you will raise your hands and step away from the others.” The voice is Colonel Taksa’s. The man himself is standing behind the spooks, hands behind his back, but sidearm holster unclasped to allow fast access. The instinct to step back into the entrance to the tunnels behind me flares up, but the others are between me and the spooks, if it comes down to it I’m not positive they won’t shoot through the others to get to me. We may all be one army, but this base doesn’t seem to have much in the way of oversight, and certainly none from anyone who would prioritize me over whatever it is they’re trying to get at by taking custody of me this way. I take two steps to the side, moving out from behind my men to give them more space from me in the growing likelihood that events are about to go sideways when the colonel speaks again.

“Not you, Sergeant Kent. Sergeant Alfred Boru, you are under arrest for the acts of treason against our esteemed nation. Given the charges your right to counsel has been rescinded. You will surrender your weapons and give yourself over to our custody.” Oh. I let my hands fall to my sides, but maintain the same cautious pace I had used to raise them, leaving them visible to the line of shooters boxing us in.

“Surely this is some sort of misunderstanding, sir,” Boru replies, unmoving.

“Sergeant, I will not repeat my orders.”

“Very well, sir,” Boru begins to remove the strap from his carbine from around his shoulders, but it gets caught on something. He reaches up to unfasten it and there’s the small but unmistakable noise of a grenade pin pulling loose. He’s too far from the spooks for them to hear such a small sound, but there’s nothing small about the succession of sounds that follow it in short order.

“Grenade!” every one of my men and I shout in unison before hurling ourselves in different directions and covering our vital spots as best we can while also making ourselves as flat as we can on the ground. The reverberations of our shouts are still active in the air, the soundwaves possibly not even having made it to where Taksa is standing, when the flashbang grenade Boru had secreted away somewhere on his person falls to the ground and detonates.

In the aftermath of the grenade’s namesake I’m left with only a high-pitched ringing in my ears, my vision having been saved from temporary loss by virtue of the fact that my face was kissing dirt during the explosion. Hands are on me, pulling at me, dragging me back towards the tunnels. I see a burned uniform pant leg and lift my head. Boru is trying to get me on my feet again, trying to bring me into the underground portion of the base again. As a hostage? I fight with him, wrenching at his hands, but his grip is strong and I have no leverage from my half-prone position.

Havcoff appears, barreling out of nowhere in the tinnitus-infused delirium everyone near the grenade must be sharing right now. Colliding with Boru, he drives the shorter man back to the threshold of the tunnels, causing Boru to relinquish his hold on me. I fall back to the ground, breath exploding from my lungs on impact. I try to rise but my balance is off. From the grenade?

Havcoff is wrestling with Boru for control of his sidearm, the carbine being too long to use with their bodies pressed together. I can see the edge of the staircase descending underground through the doorway. Boru’s heel is close to it, inching closer and closer as Havcoff abuses the leverage his height gives him in order to bend his opponent off balance. I struggle to rise, impaired by having the wind knocked out of me, of being deafened by the blast, of the exhaustion from the workout I just completed but which feels a lifetime ago. I get to my hands

and knees, and crawl forward until I'm able to plant a foot beneath myself and prepare to launch myself into the melee. I'm too late.

Havcoff shoves again, and Boru's burned leg steps back too far. Boru tries to plant it behind him, but only half his foot finds solid ground, and injured, it's too much strain for him to bear both his and Havcoff's mass. The pair tumble out of sight, still clinging to one another, still competing for control of Boru's sidearm. The white glare of the stairwell's direct lighting flickers with yellow once with the weapon's muzzle flash, but the pop of the small caliber discharge doesn't manage to break through the ringing in my ears.

Hands loop under my armpits and Ricky hauls me to my feet. Together we stagger over to the staircase, met by Jacobs and Jarez moving in a similarly disharmonious tandem. The spook soldiers brush past us before we make it there, executing precise tactical covering maneuvers as they proceed down the staircase, apparently unhindered by their own exposure to the flashbang grenade. Colonel Taksa brings up the rear, placing a restraining grip on my shoulder, but not able to hold back Jacobs and Jarez at the same time. The spook soldiers are well out of sight at this point, having disappeared into the subterranean labyrinth after Boru, but whether they're just out of sight and disentangling him from Havcoff at the bottom of the stairs, or deeper into the maze beneath our feet, I can't tell. Not until I see the way Jacobs' shoulders sag and Jarez's fists clench when their vision breaches the lip of the staircase. The pair don't pause, though, practically flying out of sight in their haste to reach what I know they must be seeing.

Colonel Taksa's grip on me changes in nature, becoming an action of consolation rather than restraint when he witnesses my men's reactions with me. Then he lets me go, whether it's out of empathy or because his men have somehow signalled to him that we will no longer be in the way, I'm not sure. Could be he just didn't think he would be able to hold Ricky back



anymore. The big man might have torn my shoulder out of its socket in his attempts to catch up to the others if the colonel didn't let go and I was left caught between them.

I don't feel my legs while we make our way to the stairs, still leaning on each other even though we could probably walk on our own now. The contact is comforting in the face of what we know we're about to go through. The sight we're greeted with isn't a new one for me. Isn't a new one for any of us. It still carries the same dread weight.

Havcoff's body is motionless, strewn across the bottom four steps. Blood leaks down from an exit wound in his back, but gravity preserves the sanctity of his visage from above. He would look perfect except for the small hole in his chest, rimmed with powder-burn from the zero-distance proximity of the sidearm's discharge. One arm looks broken, bent in a place it shouldn't be, and his torso is convex in a way that suggests the bastard traitor used Havcoff as a cushion for his fall. The anger from earlier slithers around the edges of my consciousness, but sadness remains a foreign thing. The grief I feel is dissociated, kept afar by the abyss of black guilt at another of my men dying a preventable death. I should have realized the implications of Boru's odd behavior earlier. Brought them up with the colonel, or Chokey, or confronted him myself. I should have done *something*. I didn't lose the initiative, I surrendered it when I took such a passive approach to my situation. Maybe if I'd accepted the side-effects of the drugs rather than opting for meditation, which I never even got around to practicing, Havcoff wouldn't have been in such proximity to Boru when he was confronted. If I'd fought harder to get out of his grip, been better, the youngest and newest member of my team wouldn't have died saving me from a better trained, better equipped, more experienced fighter.

The first sounds to penetrate my deafness are Ricky's quiet sobs. He's bent over Havcoff, a hand cupping the head of his lifeless friend. The tenderness of the action tells me things about

the big man I never realized before. Things that I, as his sergeant, should have realized, should have stopped, or at least discussed with him. Even if I lacked the moral footing to have done so without being a hypocrite, which I do. Another drop in the bucket of my failures. Unable to maintain responsibility of my men, even to keep them safe in the heart of a base surrounded by soldiers with the best training the military can provide.

Eventually, Chokey guides me away from my diminished team. His expression is unreadable, a blank canvas repelling the black ink of its surroundings. He's retreated into his training, allowing it to take over and protect him in the face of whatever uncertainty resides in his heart.

"I have to see Pickmin, have to tell her, it should be me," I hear my own voice saying. I don't know why, don't know how close she and Havcoff became. With my inability to report Havcoff's passing to anyone else, the rest of our platoon back at our base, our commanding officer, his family, the instinct to tell someone has shifted to her.

Chokey looks sideways at me, unreadable expression softening for an instant. He changes course, away from the administration bunker which I only now realize he was taking me to, and instead brings me to Pickmin's room.

She is awake and looking better, chipper even, but her expression falls when she sees the set of my shoulders, reads the aged lines of my face. Chokey closes the door until it's leaning shut, but not latched, leaving us in the dark and telling us he can only cover for a few minutes. It's not enough, can't be enough, but we take it. For the first minute I stand in silence by Pickmin's bed, searching for words. For the next I manage to convey in half sentences what happened. For the last I collapse on the edge of the bed and she holds my face against her

shoulder. Her hair shrouds my face, giving me the first feeling of privacy I've had since waking up here.

Chokey's soft knock lets us know our final minute is up. I take one last breath, trying to save the scent of Pickmin's dark hair so that it can support me through whatever comes next. As if mocking my best efforts, the smell vanishes into the far reaches of my memory as soon as I've left the room, and I can only recall the barest hint of its effects. The minute's respite her presence provided was enough, though, for me to regain composure, to retreat behind the walls of my training the way Chokey has. By the time I've been delivered to the colonel's office once more, I am collected, or numbed, enough to stand before him without being embarrassed to wear the rank insignia of a sergeant on my shoulders.

"Sergeant, I apologize for the tragedy that just occurred. We underestimated former Sergeant Boru, and it has cost you and your men a comrade. A loss all the more sorely felt for its nearness to the events of a few days ago, I'm sure."

"How did you know, sir?" I move past the condolences and steer the conversation towards practical ends. "How did you know he was a spy?" If Colonel Taksa is taken aback by my directness or demanding tone he does not show it, allowing my forthrightness to pass and answering my question.

"I have suspected for some time, before your arrival here even, and in part due to the nature of the ambush on your platoon. It was all too well executed. Nobody outside of this facility was aware of your platoon's movements, not even the lieutenant in charge of your platoon."

"Respectfully, sir, that doesn't tell me how you knew."

“Of course, of course. I confess you may find the next part . . . provocative. From the reserved behavior of you and your men during the majority of your stay here, I will guess you are probably not surprised that we have surveillance devices distributed liberally throughout the facilities. We overheard Boru’s conversation with you, and deduced he was interested in earning your sympathies, eventually your cooperation over ours.”

“We, sir?”

“The officer in charge of base security and myself. You have doubtless found the lack of officers around the base out of place. Most of them spend the majority of their time in this building, in their offices. I find that removing such stark delineations in rank as officer to junior enlisted breeds a certain camaraderie in the field that is otherwise difficult to replicate, but that’s besides the point.”

I make a noise of assent and he continues, “We laid a trap, a section of tunnel that had broken cameras, the only area in the facility that one could speak in without being overheard, but only for the breadth of a step or two. A facade of course, but we were under the impression that Boru was becoming desperate. Apparently we were correct.” Realization dawns on me.

“I was bait.” It’s not a question. “You gave us permission to move about the base hoping he’d use it as an opportunity to get me down there.” Taksa doesn’t bother with confirmation, we both know I’m right.

“Your plan cost a man his life.” The anger is igniting in me again, but if Taksa is unnerved he doesn’t show it.

“*Sergeant*,” he emphasizes my rank, “I regret the way events unfolded, but it was necessary to remove a danger from this facility.”

“Yes, *sir*,” I emphasize his own rank as a show of acquiescence before continuing, “Where are you holding Boru now?” The colonel blanches, just a microsecond flash of discomfort. It’s the first time I’ve seen a reaction from him that I don’t think was intentional, and it tells me everything it needs to.

“He got away?” I ask, not believing it possible for one man to have eluded the literal army of elite special forces, of *spooks*.

“In spite of his injuries it seems the former sergeant was able to . . . outmaneuver my other men in the tunnels. He left two of them severely injured during his flight to one of the outer exits. Both will be facing possible medical retirement.” The way he says “retirement” makes it sound as though he believes it the worst fate that can befall a soldier.

“We have, of course, sent teams after him, but Sergeant Boru has more experience in these forests than any other soldier I’ve commanded, and not by a small margin. Capturing him is still likely given his injury and limited resources. It will be a matter of time, more than anything I suspect. Are you going to ask me if you can help in the search?” I want to. So badly I want to find the traitorous bastard that killed Havcoff, but the responsible part of me, the trained sergeant considering the lives of his remaining men, resists.

“No, sir, I was not going to request that.” Boru is better trained than myself or any of my men, he knows the terrain better. He’s armed. Sending my men into that would be like hunting a snake in the grass. Just asking to get bit. The colonel nods with respect for my decision. My fingernails dig furrows into my palms. The pain does nothing to quell my burning frustration in the face of my impotence.

“I would request, sir, that I revisit the option of medication with Dr. Kingston.” Without answering, he opens a drawer in his desk and produces several pill bottles and a note.

“I was hoping I’d be able to convince you to do so when I called you here, though I wouldn’t order it given the potential side-effects. With Boru in the wind it is more crucial than ever that we find the package. If, by some slim chance, Boru escapes and recovers it the results could be doubly catastrophic.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, unsure of what else is left to be said. He dismisses me and I leave with the pills, and the note, the latter of which contains directions for use from Dr. Kingston, as well as encouragement to go ahead with the meditation as well. I walk with Chokey to the chow hall and take several wooden bites of food, tasting nothing, because that’s what the note tells me to do. Then I swallow the pills with water. When all is said and done, we leave to search for my men. A bitter taste permeates my mouth. I resist the urge to spit on the coarse ground between the dull gray buildings standing between me and the murky shadows cast by the broad leaves in the canopy.

“We’ll find him, Sergeant James,” Chokey says from his place beside me, resting a calloused hand on my shoulder and flashing his cocky smile. “Boru’s very good, but he’s got the best after him.” I want to believe that we will, that it’s only a matter of time like Taksa says, but Chokey’s knuckles are bleach white against the mottled earth tones of my uniform.

## Chapter IX: Zero hour, zero joy

Few things bring home the relativity of time the way loss does, at least for me. It's always the same when a friend dies, it's always that oddness where every minute feels like a lifetime, like time is standing still, but also like I look up and the sun has tracked hours of its way across the sky. At least I get to see the sun directly, still just for the brief moments between buildings, but for the next three days it offers me a fleeting moment of peace each time. The kiss of its warmth touching me in a way that bypasses the numbness.

Then, without fail, I wonder if Havcoff would have felt the same, and I realize how little I really knew that man placed in my charge. He was a good man, I want to believe that. He would joke and get rough with the other members of the team, but something about him wasn't rowdy in the same way. Somehow innocent despite plying the same ugly trade as the rest of us. He lacked Jacobs' guile, or Ricky's paranoia. His crush on Pickmin was so gentle and endearing, different from the suave movements Jarez employed between deployments. My inaction in addressing his ardor as his friend, or even as his sergeant, stings with a guilt only cowardice brings.

That particular failing haunts my thoughts for the three timeless days after the confrontation with Boru, and I resolve to speak with Pickmin when we're away from this place and its persistent surveillance. The bastard, Boru, is still in the wind, although the colonel reassures me it's only a matter of time on the rare occasions we pass one another around the base. Images of justice, and its nefarious twin revenge, drift through my mind during my meditations. They pull me out of the "zone," as Ricky calls it, and every time they pass through, I have to reset my breathing and start again. Ricky and Dr. Kingston both tell me I shouldn't be

*trying* to remember what happened, but allowing my mind to find some sort of neutral zone I don't understand no matter how many times each of them try to explain it to me.

For brief instances I think I've found it only to have it slip away again and again. The frustration eats at me, compounded by the continued inaction and quarantine at the facility. Exercise does little to remedy the building mania. Every time I descend to the subterranean portion of the base we're forced to walk through that staircase. There are other entrances of course, but I'm not permitted to access them unless it's an emergency. So each time I'm slapped with a reminder of my failing. I know it's not easier for the others, but I encourage them to spend as much time being active as they can manage. It's really all we can do, and if they aren't training, aren't working out, they'll have more time to sit and stew in their own thoughts.

They spend a considerable amount of time in the urban combat rooms when the spooks aren't using it. The staff in charge of base supply don't seem to mind the extra expenditure of ammunition, and have no problem signing out the weapons as long as Chokey is present. I envy them the outlet, the opportunity to break and destroy. To slip into that othered state instilled in us all through innumerable hours of training and use. Still, I don't return to the rooms except to watch.

My disuse of the rooms is conspicuous. I see the sidelong glances, the way Jacobs holds my eyes for an extra second whenever we're down there. They talk about anything else, anything not my breakdown. They mean well, but their behavior only adds to my growing sense that I've finally broken. Maria didn't want me to reenlist after my first tour, but I did anyway. Didn't even talk to her about it. It was my decision, my job, and we needed the money. I still believed then, in the mission, and the military. Now I believe just in my men, but I don't know if they believe in me anymore. I don't know if they should. They've lost so many friends, not just in the last



week, but since they've known me. It gets harder for me to tell myself that I've saved more than I've hurt. Maybe Maria was right and I should have left. I think I should want to tell her that, should want to talk to her, but I don't think I do. She couldn't understand this, she'd tell me it wasn't my fault, that it's just how war is. She doesn't know anything about war, and if she *could* understand, I wouldn't want her to. I fight the urge to talk to Pickmin instead, only visiting her in the company of the others. I can see the hurt in her eyes when she looks at me during my sparse appearances over those three days. I see it, and hope the others don't. If they do, they say nothing.

I do see Chokey giving me appraising looks with increasing frequency. They're subtle at first, but by the third day he's thrown subtlety aside in favor of a mute and impassive displeasure. What its source is I don't know, but it comes to a head in the middle of the night when he drags me bodily from my bunk in the barracks.

"On your feet, Sergeant James," he hisses at me. His voice is low so as not to wake the others, but the amount of authority it carries is shocking coming from a private, even one of his specialized background.

"Chokey, what—"

"Get dressed." He cuts me off by shoving a uniform in my hands. Nonplussed, I follow his directions, rubbing sleep from my eyes. Three minutes later I've finished lacing my boots. I can't make out Chokey's features in the darkness of the Barracks, his silhouette revealed only by the lighting on the various emergency systems and the wall monitor several bunks down in the building's singular large room. From what I can tell of his body language the young man is impatient. I wonder if he'd go so far as to disregard our disparate military ranks and haul me to

my feet. I decide it's better not to try him on the matter, expediting my journey to a standing position of my own volition.

The shadow that he is executes a sharp about-face and departs the building via its primary entrance, not looking back to see if I'm following. As I've come to expect from him, he doesn't make a sound with his egress. My own movements following him feel apish by comparison, but if anyone is woken by my comparative racket, they don't betray their conscious state.

I'm at least a half-dozen meters behind Chokey by the time I've picked my way across the dark room to the exit, and I have to double-time it to catch up, offering a cursory nod to the guards on duty on my way past them. It doesn't take long for me to deduce our destination. It's not a big base.

It could be my still half-asleep brain or the surreal nature of so much that's happened recently, but walking down the stairs to where Havcoff died feels more like I'm floating than moving under my own power. I expect Chokey to stop there, to give me some cheesy pep-talk or even yell at me for something that he thinks should be obvious to me but isn't. He doesn't even hesitate on his way past the cold concrete floor that had to be scrubbed twice to remove the last vestiges of red from their unforgiving surface. I do stop, but Chokey clears his throat and keeps walking in a way that suggests he's not going to wait for me to do whatever it is he's brought me here for, so I follow again, trailing behind like a nervous child on his way to the school office. It's not much longer until the mystery resolves by way of a loaded carbine at the urban combat exercise entrance.

"I didn't have access to as much of your file as Boru did before. I do now. You're a sergeant, time to get off your ass and act like it again." He forces the weapon into my hands.

"I can't," I reply. He doesn't understand. I don't know how to explain it.

“You’re afraid,” he says. “You’re afraid, and that’s okay. What’s not okay is the way you’re hiding from it and hoping it’ll go away. Get your shit together, get off your ass, and clear those rooms.”

Maybe if he sees it again he’ll understand, or at least let it go. Resigned, I walk through the door, carbine shaking in my clenched hands, butt pressed too tightly into my shoulder. I know what he’s done. I know what I’m going to see through these doors. I’m going back to that place. Back to kill the boy again. Dez. The name I’ve pushed down so many times before comes back again. I let it, allowing the pain it brings to wash over me. It’s not just him I killed, it’s every soldier who died when I froze that day. My soldiers.

I’m wrong. The room is different. Different setup, different furniture, different *targets*. I shoot them. Bang-bang, bang-bang, bang-bang. My shots are slow. Hesitant, off-center, widely spaced. I move to the next room, through the open doorway, and put rounds into those targets too. My hands shake just a little less, my aim a little better. I do the next room, and the next. When I finish the course and exit to the observation room Chokey is waiting.

“Every soldier who hits a non-com in that room stays up all night doing it again. So we’re going to stay here all night, and you’re going to go through that room over and over again until you get the message.”

“Not to shoot non-coms?” I ask.

“No,” he replies, unblinking, “That mistakes happen, but that doesn’t mean we stop. It means we get better. Not every room is the same room. The sooner you realize that, the sooner you can get off your ass and—”

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“Get off your ass, Lieutenant.” I hear the voice emanate through a thicket of bushy saplings to my left, away from the ever more sporadic gunfire on the ridge, and past the scrapped husk of vehicle one. I make a split-second judgement call and break away from the foot of the cliff leading up to the plateau, exposing myself for the meters it will take me to disappear into the visual clutter of the forest. I’m banking on enemy forces on top of the ridge being too busy dealing with the remainder of my platoon’s combat power to look over at me. The gamble pays off, allowing me to drop to a low crawl through the underbrush, the sounds of crunching twigs and displaced leaves concealed by the nearby combat.

It takes very little crawling before I find myself looking out on a clearing. The open area can’t be more than ten meters from the road, yet I never would have known it was here if it weren’t for the raised voices.

“I said get off your ass, Lieutenant.” The tone is at once both familiar and foreign. I know that I *know* it, and yet I know that I *shouldn’t* know it at the same time. Whoever it is, my vision of them is blocked by a branch that has fallen recently enough to still retain its leaves. I can see my lieutenant around the left side of the branch though, and he looks in rough shape. His sleeve is torn and bloody from his shoulder to his forearm, and even from several meters away, the burns marring his handsome features are visible, their tender red-pink hues and yellow blisters a stark contrast to the man’s dark skin. Two more men are in my line of sight, standing straight in military fatigues with their backs to me. The camouflage pattern on their uniforms is wrong. Similar to the one on my own uniform, but finer, more detailed, making the men’s outlines fade in and out of focus against the colors of the forest when they shift their weight.

My lieutenant struggles to stand, and one of the men steps forward to haul him to his feet, not being gentle. The man steps past my lieutenant afterwards, taking up a position facing me on

his other side, keeping the wounded officer surrounded. Shock and fear flood my system with fresh adrenaline when the man now facing me pans his head from side to side, seeming to hesitate for just a moment each time his gaze passes my position. Whether I'm imagining that he's seen me or not, there is no mistaking Boru's Forester features.

My head aches, splitting as another part of my consciousness tries to impede on the scene. I *don't* know Boru, but I *do* know him, just not now. His presence at the site of my platoon's ambush serves to further damn him in my eyes, stoking my hatred for the man.

"Where's the package?" The man I can't see is talking again, and my lieutenant is shaking his head.

"Go to hell," he says.

"This doesn't have to be difficult. It can be quick, and the sooner you tell me, the fewer of your men have to die out in that fight. Help is just a call away."

"Go to hell, *sir*." The last word is spat with more disgust than I've ever heard contained in a single syllable, and with it my blood runs cold with recognition. Colonel Taksa steps into view and looks up into the face of my lieutenant, expressionless. As casual as if he were shrugging his shoulders, Taksa draws his sidearm and fires three rounds into my lieutenant's stomach. The man I've been following into and out of danger for my last two deployments crumples to the ground, gasping, ending in a fetal position, trying in vain to staunch the flow of blood from his abdomen.

"He wasn't going to break, not fast enough," Taksa says to Boru. "Go lead your men to the 'rescue.' One of them might know where the lieutenant stashed the package, he can't have gotten it too far in so little time."

“Yes, sir,” Boru answers, and takes off from the clearing at a jog, talking into his radio as he does. There’s no imagining that he makes eye contact with me this time. Whatever his reasons, the traitor doesn’t give me away. I have to bite my tongue to keep myself from shouting at the sight of my commanding officer dying on the ground in front of me, and I taste the blood that wells from the punctures left by my teeth.

“Sir, what about him?” The man with his back to me asks, another familiar voice, but not one I want to believe. The splitting pain in my head worsens, making me want to black out, but I can’t afford to now, I need to remember.

“Leave him, the Forest will take care of the evidence for us.” With a jerk of the head Taksa signals their departure. They leave without ever turning towards me, two of them without ever casting a second look at the man their treason has just murdered. The third, the man with the familiar voice turns back before I lose sight of him. The impassivity of Chokey’s young features is betrayed by a momentary glassiness in his eyes, but then he too departs.

I wait as long as I think I can, listening to the whimpers of my suffering officer. Stomach wounds are nefarious. Sometimes they’re quick, causing the blood to evacuate the body fast enough that the pain doesn’t last too long. Sometimes they mean days of agony as the victim lies incapacitated, feeling the wound fester or leak acid and bile into their system and cause sepsis. I don’t know what kind my lieutenant has, but I can’t risk revealing myself too soon.

Long moments pass. When the whimpers begin to soften I realize I can’t wait anymore. Even if the man doesn’t die he could slip into an unconsciousness I can’t wake him from. I break cover, making my way to him fast and low, scanning the area and seeing nothing between the trees.

“L.T., it’s me, it’s me,” I whisper to him as loudly as I dare to.

“Kent, you have—” He stops and convulses, retching up something dark that dribbles down his chin. “You have to get the package. I looked . . . inside and it has to get back to command.”

“I will, but first we have to get you out of here. You’re gonna’ be fine. Remember that time Jaque got hit in the stomach, he was fine, and you will be too.” The lie spills out of me, a desperate attempt at comfort for yet another dying brother. He grabs my face with his bloodied hands, fingers stretching across my temples to mat my hair with the coagulating mess.

“In the woods, North-East, 134 paces. It’s—” He coughs up more of the blood-bile concoction. “It’s buried beneath a fallen log, red moss on the south side. Find it, get it back.” His hands fall away from me and he flops to his side, curling in on himself, shivering. I search him for his meds, but find none. His gear has been stripped away and left elsewhere. I pull my own out instead, taking out the single-use injector filled with maximum strength painkillers. They’ll numb out pretty much anything and keep a soldier fighting . . . or give a man peace in the last moments of his life. I stick the needle into his neck and watch his body relax as the pain leaves him so that he can slip into merciful oblivion. Something in me breaks when I leave him there like that. A warrior dying alone, curled up like a child in the middle of a clearing, in a forest he probably never wanted to be in to begin with.

I follow my compass in the direction he told me to, forced to walk so that I can keep pace with his count. I’m muttering the numbers off under my breath so I don’t lose track, the natural drugs in my body making higher brain functions like counting difficult. 25, 26, 27, 28 . . . The weapon fire from the road has stopped. Boru “saving” what’s left of my platoon, no doubt. 54, 55, 5-click.

I stop dead in my tracks, balanced on one foot. The forest has many dangers, most of them left by the Foresters. One of their favorites is booby-traps surrounding the ambushes they set for us. If we flee we still might die. It tends to make us fight harder, but they seem to like the fear it puts in us regardless of that. We're taught in training what it sounds like when we've stepped on an anti-personnel mine, which is how I know I'm well and truly fucked.

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I refocus on Chokey, the real one that I'm with now. I'm surprised by the amount of pain I feel with the revelation of his betrayal. I've only known the young man for about a week, but it stings like we've been friends for years. That hurt must show on my face, because I see the light in Chokey's eyes die as he somehow realizes I know. Maybe it was my expression, the blankness of remembrance being replaced by the acute lines of pain inherent to those who feel their friend has stabbed them in the back but can't understand why. Maybe it was my body language instead, my inability to prevent myself from stepping back into a defensive posture, shoulders hunching in the way a growling wolf's would, knees bending in readiness to pounce or flee. Whatever it was that gave me away, sadness flickers across Chokey's face before it falls into the cool mask of a soldier following orders.

"Don't," he says. The simple word a simultaneous plea and order. I do. I lash out at him with the stock of the carbine still in my hands, all its bullets spent in the training room.

In a different world I would have been clever enough, quick enough to disguise my awareness of his treason, to play the long game until I was in a better position to get my men and myself out of here. This is not that world, and when Chokey steps back and avoids my first strike, moving around my two follow-ups like he already knew what they'd be in advance, I know the hopelessness of my situation.



In desperation, I hurl the weapon at Chokey's feet and turn on my heel to run, eliciting a startled exhalation from him. I don't see how effective my paltry attempt to give myself a head-start was, don't dare to look over my shoulder while I hurtle through the tunnels and doorways, across the small gym area, and up the stairs to the outside. I'm not sure where I'm going, instinct is driving me in the direction of my men, to regroup, to gain time to plan.

I explode out of the doorway to the outside at a full run, legs burning from their churning flight up the stairs. I'm three steps into the open when a heavy mass collides with me from behind. Limbs wrap around me like some sort of octopus as Chokey brings me to the ground. I try to struggle free, to turn, to establish a position of dominance the way I was taught to in a ground fight. It's useless, he already has me pinned, leveraging his weight and position to prevent my escape. I buck and twist, thrashing against the corded muscles in his arms where they constrict around me. Progress. We're rolling, I'm on top, but he's still behind me. I free an arm and throw blind elbows behind me. I hit the ground, his ribs, his own arm, but then the arm I freed myself from wraps around my neck. I keep scrabbling at his wrist, trying to pry it free, instinct making me forget the impossibility of overpowering his arm in that position.

Some ridiculous part of my brain notes how beautiful the stars look from my immobilized position, which is in essence just lying on the ground with Chokey as a pillow. That same part of my brain remarks how unfortunate it is that clouds are rolling in from all sides to block them out. Then logic uses its final breath to tell me there are no clouds, I'm asphyxiating. The world goes dark.

## Chapter X: Keeping faith

When I wake, it's to the exquisite discomfort of a migraine. The feeling is exacerbated by a high-pitched beep coming from somewhere overhead. Altogether, the experience makes it difficult to be grateful for my continued existence.

“Good morning, Sergeant Kent, how are you feeling?” It's Taksa's voice. I sit up, cracking my eyes open to the same harsh white light that permeates every other part of the facility I've been in, but this room is new. It's white, *all* white, every surface, even the bench I find myself swinging my feet off of. The bench is, of course, bolted to the wall, as is the table in the center of the room. The only nonwhite element I can find is the window which takes up most of the wall opposite the bench, beyond which is a white hallway that's just as austere as the room I'm viewing it from. It's not a big room, but it's a very large window. Shatterproof, no doubt, or the colonel wouldn't look so at ease standing on the other side of it in what looks to be a hallway. Also white. I'm developing the sensation of having been removed from reality. It's all too clean, too uniform, too perfect—especially for a military installation.

“Is it actually morning, or are you just saying that, Sir?” I ask, adding the ironic honorific to show I'm not afraid. I'm very afraid. Afraid for myself, for my men, for Pickmin. If they took me, they took the others. I hold out the faint hope they let Pickmin be. There is no way my team wouldn't have realized my absence, but with the distance I was keeping from Pickmin, with her isolation in the medical facility, they could concoct a lie to keep her out of this. It would be one less concern for them. I tell myself that twice before calling my naivety on its bullshit. They have her, and the others, no point denying it.

“We have ourselves in a bit of a predicament,” Taksa says, ignoring my question.

“I don’t know how, or how much, you know, so I can’t just let you go after we get the package back anymore,” he continues.

“Like you were ever going to after what you did to my lieutenant.” Shit. I just tipped my hand.

“Ah, so you saw that. Well I guess that does explain former Sergeant Boru’s outburst to you before he departed. A desperate attempt to trigger your memory. Thank you for giving that up, we were concerned we weren’t understanding whatever it was he intended.”

“Where are my men?”

“Safe, for the moment. They’ll continue to be, provided you give up the package location.”

“I don’t know where it is,” I lie.

“I don’t believe that’s true. Given how much else you’ve remembered, and now knowing what you saw happen to the lieutenant, I think you were with him when he hid it.” Well, he’s wrong about that at least, for all the good it does me now.

“I wasn’t, I don’t know where it is.”

“Then I don’t have any reason to keep you or your men alive now that you’ve seen all this, do I?”

I hesitate, giving myself way, and he knows he has me.

“Why would you keep us alive if I told you?”

“Well I suppose you won’t trust me if I say I really don’t want to kill you.”

“I wonder why that is,” I spit at him.

“A shame, because that’s really your only option.”

“I could not tell you, and I won’t if you kill my men.”

“I have no intention of harming your men, Sergeant. Your illicit love, on the other hand . . .” He trails off, not finishing the statement. I lurch across the room, around the table, throwing my weight into my shoulder against the window. It doesn’t even bend.

“You should know better than to engage in such relations with another member of your platoon, especially a subordinate. It really does make you vulnerable, for which I thank you in this instance.” I pound the glass with my fist, more in frustration than an attempt to break out.

“Here’s the deal,” Taksa says, businesslike, “You give up the package, and we’ll send you and your men somewhere safe. It won’t be pleasant, but you’ll be alive.”

“No,” I say, not believing a word of Taksa’s.

“Your alternative is to refuse us, in which case we will break you. We’re good at that, and you already have the blood of so many friends on your hands. We have your file, Dr. Kingston and I watched your episode in the training rooms together. We agree in thinking you can’t handle anymore. Were I a betting man I’d say you agree too.”

“No,” I repeat, not knowing what else to say, not seeing another option. Whatever was in that package, the lieutenant told me they couldn’t be allowed to have it.

“Very well.” A white screen snaps down, shutting out my view into the hallway and cutting me off from Taksa. I wait, and nothing more happens. I’m left to stew in the room. I’ve seen it done in interrogations of Foresters before. Too much time alone with their own thoughts and they start to break, second-guessing themselves, imagining scenarios worse than anything we’d actually be allowed to do to them. They convince themselves that talking is their only option. Torture is notorious for its mixed results anyway.

I walk back to the bench and take a seat, settling in for the wait. All I have to do is not break. My men don’t know anything, Pickmin doesn’t know anything, they can’t give up what

they don't know. But what if they hurt them? What if they turn them against me? I think about how they could make this look if they wanted to, the surveillance evidence: I do the training course again, the same one that they saw me collapse in, then I attack Chokey and run. They all think that I disappeared with the package in the first place. The spooks could spin this so I'm the bad guy, and do my men still trust me enough to know otherwise? Pickmin does, she's seen me break and didn't hesitate to pull me in. What about the others?

I force myself to think about something else, anything else. I can't do anything about what the others will think, not without being able to speak with them. I just have to have faith in them, and hope they have the same in me. The thoughts won't leave, though. They keep circling back. I can't force them out no matter what happy memory I try to focus on. Out of options, I look elsewhere for a distraction, flipping through memories and emotions in search of something that will work, despite the way it makes my migraine flare.

I land on guilt. Not the guilt of failing men, of getting them killed, that will only help Taksa. I land on the guilt of Maria, what I've done to her. *Been doing* to her. The way I distanced myself from her the last time I was "home." Even in my mind the phrase has scare quotes around it. It hasn't felt like home to me since my second deployment, since the boy. I never told her about that, or any of it. I just pulled away, found someone with whom I didn't need to be brave enough to try. The shame of that cowardice drowns my mind, submerging everything else when I face it, admit how it defines me.

Sitting there in the quiet with my thoughts, with the shame and pain, I begin to laugh. They can't break me, I'm already broken, and the absurdity of it erupts from me in deranged chuckles. The violent expulsion of air wracks my body, my shoulders heave from my gasps in the struggle to replace the lost oxygen.

I'm still laughing when the walls on either side of me snap down into the floor, leaving the same unbreakable windows in their place. These ones show no frame, though they take up the entirety of the space the wall used to be, revealing identical rooms to my own on either side. Same bench. Same tables. Both occupied.

Jacobs is strapped down on one table, Pickmin is on the other, Chokey standing over her, face still wearing the expressionless mask from the training room.

"I apologize for the wait," Taksa's voice comes from speakers hidden somewhere in the white expanse of the ceiling.

"What is this?" I look up when I demand my answer, unsure where the cameras might be.

"This is the irony that will break you. You'll pardon the drama, but the good Dr. Kinston deemed that thing you could least stand would be more blood on your hands, literally." The wall-sized window facing the room Jacobs is in hisses into the floor, granting me access to his room as well as mine. I hurry over to him, searching the straps binding him down for a clasp or release. I find one, but before I can undo it Taksa's voice plays through the speakers again.

"You'll both do better to leave those in place. No point beating around the bush anymore. You're going to cut him. You'll do it exactly as I describe it to you. If you don't, Pvt. Chokey will kill Pfc. Pickmin. Don't fret though, if you're careful about following directions your man should live."

A slot opens in the wall, depositing a scalpel before it claps shut again. I stare at it in disbelief, then look over at Chokey, whose placid expression doesn't shift as he releases the clasp on his sidearm. I want to believe he doesn't agree with this, but the deadness in his eyes tells me he'll do it regardless of his personal feelings. Whatever his motivation, it's too potent to be overcome by any morality the man might have.

“These are unlawful orders, Private,” I shout at him in a last gambit to salvage the situation. I think I see a tightness around his lips that wasn’t there before, but that could just be my imagination.

“I’ll make it quick,” he says in a quiet voice, looking away from me and drawing his weapon from its holster.

“No, no wait,” I yell, frantic now and looking down at Jacobs. There’s fear in his eyes, but he nods. A braver man than me by far.

“Do it,” he whispers. “I know you can’t let them kill her.”

“I can’t.” Tears are close to the surface, my sergeant’s facade is collapsing, my ability to pretend to be in control for my men coming apart at the seams. The click of a hammer being drawn back is almost inaudible over the ragged breaths I’m drawing.

“Do it,” Jacobs screams in my face. Hand shaking I pick up the scalpel.

“It’s not too late,” Taksa’s voice says. “You can still keep more blood from your hands if you just tell me where the package is.” I can’t tell him. Whatever is in that package, my lieutenant decided it was better that his entire platoon be killed than this man get it. I cling to that knowledge as my mind crumbles. Taksa sighs and tells me where and how to make the first cut.

I do it. Pulling up Jacobs’ shirt, I draw thin red lines across his ribs, then his abdomen. They aren’t deep at first, and Jacobs keeps his act together, breathing hard between cuts but holding his breath when the knife’s on him, trying to keep it from going too deep by accident. My hand shakes harder and I have to steady it with the other one so I don’t drive it point-first into Jacobs with any violent tremors.

Taksa tells me to slice deeper, and Jacobs’ ability to keep silent breaks down little by little. I take off my belt and put it in his mouth. His teeth clamp down on it, jaw muscles bulging.

I wait for him to get himself under control, stalling for as much time as I can. Taksa clears his throat, not letting me or Jacobs have the time we need to pull ourselves together. I keep cutting with unsteady hands.

The thin lines of the scalpel grow thicker and less fine as blood seeps out of them. Jacobs is screaming through the belt clenched in his teeth. I don't know how long I've been cutting for or how much longer I can make myself continue; blood sheets out of several deep gashes I've inflicted on the tortured man. The viscous liquid coats my fingers, dripping down to my wrist and staining my uniform sleeves. I roll them up but that just carries the blood from my hands up my forearms, the gory mess spreading across more of my body. It makes me want to be sick and I have to swallow the impulse to throw up. The handle of the instrument in my hands slickens causing the horrid work it does to become sloppy. I try to stop to clean it, but Taksa orders me to keep going every time I pull the knife away from Jacobs. I refuse once, Taksa just says, "Private," and Chokey tenses. I rush to comply with Taksa before Chokey can exert the minimal pressure it would take to pull the trigger of his weapon.

The biggest mistake I make is looking up and seeing the horror in Pickmin's eyes, the fear at what the man she trusted does to her friend and comrade. I don't look up again. Tears drip down my cheeks. I have to wipe them away with bloodied hands so they don't fall onto the open wounds across Jacobs' body. The blood mixes with the tears and smears across my face, gets in my nose. I press my lips together so I don't get it in my mouth, but it does anyway. The smell of it, the taste of it, the sounds of Jacobs screaming through the belt . . . and the quiet sobs from Pickmin from her place on the far table, forced to watch.

It doesn't stop until Jacobs passes out. From pain or blood loss I don't know. Despondent, I follow Taksa's directive to return to my bench. When I'm seated, the walls slide



back up and I'm left alone in my white room again. I ask what will happen to Jacobs, to Pickmin, but get no answer. Even Taksa's abandoned me to sit with what I've done. I throw up. The vomit is bloody. I can't tell if it's the blood that got in my mouth from Jacobs, or my own. I think I want it to be mine, but I can't tell. Eventually, I curl into a ball on my side, red-tinged bile leaking from my lips, and pass out.

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In the queer fog of unconsciousness I remember throwing myself from the landmine I'd stepped on. Tucking my body into a ball like a child when they leap off a dock into the water. Remember how my vest took the worst of the shrapnel, remember being thrown by the concussive force of the blast. Then, the dim recollection of being found, of voices in the blurry dark.

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There is nothingness, and then there is darkness, and pain, and the scratchiness of military-issued sheets on my exposed legs. As always, there is no bleary transition between the two. I crack my eyes open and the harsh lighting of ceiling tube lights cuts through the black, blinding me momentarily. Through it all, there's the face of the boy, the look in his eyes. It's superimposed across my vision, burned there, scare-like. Even when the tears blur the sharpness of the tube lights, the boy's face remains in focus.

A weight falls on my hand, and I force the tears back, unable to bear the thought of someone seeing me cry, seeing me more vulnerable than I already am.

"Sergeant, do you know where you are?" a female voice asks. I tell her I don't, and she tells me I'm back at my base. She emphasizes that I'm safe, she tells me how brave I am for storming that building alone. I think she doesn't know shit. I tell her thank you, because that's

what I'm supposed to do. Maybe I'm supposed to blush too, but I don't feel like blushing. I don't feel anything, except the scratchy sheets and the pain in my ribs.

The nurse asks if there is anyone I'd like to call, a girlfriend, a wife, she looks at the tan line around my ring finger. I never wear my ring on a mission. I think about Maria, think about the worry in her voice every time I mention being hurt. My ribs will heal, there won't be scars. I decline the phone call. The boy's expression doesn't change, but a new guilt settles in with the rest, the pressure of omission adding its weight to the considerable mass already spilling from his eyes onto my soul.

The nurse tells me I have visitors waiting. Visitors. Plural. Only my lieutenant walks in, he tells me how brave I am too. I thank him. He tells me I'm also stupid. I thank him again and we both laugh like we're supposed to. He credits me with saving the lives of those who survived the rocket attack, saying I scared the enemy so bad they couldn't aim straight. He condemns the termites for killing their own people in the battle. He looks me in the eye when he says it, placing one of his large hands on my shoulder. The hand carries the significant weight of meaning with it. I understand and we give each other the barest incline of our respective heads.

He excuses himself, saying he should make way for the others. The others are the survivors of the squad I "saved," all thanking me for doing my best for them, all with venomous words for the enemy. They stay for awhile, acting exuberant in the way those of us that survive are expected to. Celebrating the victory of continued existence, and the lives of those unlucky men who aren't with us. Eventually, the visitors are replaced by others, my own men, come to say they're glad I lived, then to ask me what I thought I was doing stealing all the glory without them. They don't believe it's glory, they don't believe I think it is either. We laugh like the inside joke is funny.

When they leave the nurse comes in again for a final check in, then she's gone too. I'm left alone with the lights off, just like I requested. I feel like maybe in the dark I'll be able to let something out, let myself be vulnerable on my own, hidden. I'm not alone, can't be alone. The boy is still there, even when I close my eyes. My insides tremble against the disingenuous calm of my exterior.

A knock snaps my eyes open. A single private is there, so new and green she could tell me she graduated basic training yesterday and I'd believe her.

"Sergeant Kent?" she asks, tentative, but not shy. I can't read the name on her uniform from here. I try to answer but my voice catches in my throat, vocal cords shaky from the internal tremors. I clear my throat.

"Yes," I get out, managing to answer before a too-awkward period of time passes.

"I'm Pvt. Pickmin, my cousin was one of the victims of the rocket you tried to stop." Another pebble of guilt to add to the mountain.

"I'm sorry I couldn't save him," I say.

"I wanted to thank you, for doing everything you did." *Everything* I did. The mountain quakes, threatening avalanche. I can't let it out, especially not to this private who just lost family. The understanding that passed between my lieutenant and me, the necessity for the narrative to be upheld, they fortify my resolve. Not enough. The private takes cautious steps forward, reading something on my face that isn't supposed to be there. Something changes, her expression firms into something older than her years should be capable of. She places a single hand on my arm in an impossible action of humanity. I shatter.

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When I wake, it's Ricky strapped to the table next. The process repeats itself. Ricky doesn't take it as well as Jacobs did, and I collapse during his torture, whether it be from dehydration, or hunger, or just my mind fleeing the reality of its situation I don't know.

I'm forced to eat under threat of Pickmin being tortured. I barely keep the food and liquid down, but I get enough to regain some of my vigor.

It all comes back up when they put Jarez on the table next. Still, I cut him. I don't hear Pickmin sobbing while I work anymore. Maybe it's just drowned out by Jarez's screams when he can't keep the belt in his mouth any longer. He prays between cuts. I didn't know he was that religious.

The next time I wake it's to nothing, no questioning, no option to tell them where the package is. Just the blank white walls and table of the room. I wonder if there's a way I can kill myself before they stop me, but if I do that there's nothing keeping Pickmin alive anymore. The last order of a dying lieutenant and the love for a woman who can't possibly ever look at me the same again are the only things that keep me going. That day of silence is the worst. It makes me realize I miss the company of the screams.

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I open my eyes from another cycle of sleep that offered no reprieve from the trials of the previous days, the torments I inflicted being replayed for my unconscious eyes. I expect to hear Taksa's usual greeting, wishing me a good morning. I don't even know if it's actually morning when he says it or if he's just fucking with me. Time is relative in a way I'd never understood before. There is no night and day, just the cycle. Wake, eat, cut, sleep, repeat.

Something is different now, though. I've woken, but there is no food tray, no Taksa's voice over the speakers, no Chokey standing in the other room with Pickmin and the threat of

murder. The intercom crackles again, and I realize that it is *again* and that *the first time* is what roused me ahead of the cycle's schedule.

"Kent, can you hear me? Kent." The voice is impossible. It's Boru's. How? Even if he evaded the teams hunting him, how can he be talking to me here, like this?

"Boru?" I demand of the empty room, furious at the sound of his voice, but cautious of the possibility that this is my own encroaching insanity.

"Yes, Kent, it's me. Listen, you need to tell them you're going to take them to the package."

"Go to hell."

"I need you to do this. *You* need you to do this," Boru's voice insists.

"You and Taksa can go fuck each other, I'm not telling anyone where the package is."

"You won't, you just need to get yourself out of that room. Once you're out I can help us escape from there." I bite off the next acid response before it can leave my mouth, swallowing my rage for the hope his words offer to me and my tortured men.

"Escape? With the others?" There's a pause.

". . . No, I can't get you all out."

"Then no, they'll be killed when I go," I say.

"They'll die if you stay anyway," he tells me, but I can't agree. I can't believe that the unending cycles have been for nothing but the same result as if I'd just let Pickmin and the others die to begin with. More than that, I don't want to leave alone, not after everything I've done to them.

"I won't leave them." There's another silence, longer this time.

“Fine, I’ll figure something out, but you have to get out of that room. Today. I have to go. Make sure you get out.”

“Wait, Boru? Boru?” Nothing. I swear at the empty of the room.

I can’t trust Boru can I? Can’t tell them where the package is? All the cutting, all the blood. That look from Pickmin. If this is a trick all of it was wasted. But if I don’t . . . the thought of prolonging this, of cutting *more* without even the possibility of an end is crushing. I need to know first. I need to cast off the “Ours is not to reason why” and question this.

“What’s in the package?” I ask Taksa, the next time his voice comes through the speakers. The walls haven’t slid down yet; it’s just me and his voice.

“It took you longer than expected to ask that, Sergeant,” he replies.

“Then you’ve had time to think of an answer.”

“Will you tell me where it is if I answer you?”

“I’ll continue not telling you where it is if you don’t. How much longer do you think we can do this anyway? Eventually one of my men is going to die from this. They don’t have enough time to recover.”

“Very well, Sergeant Kent. Let’s talk.” The window in the wall to the hallways slides down for the first time since my first cycle here, revealing the face that matches the voice over the speakers. Taksa doesn’t look like he’s changed at all. I know the same can’t be said of myself. The glass reflects my image back at me. Beard grown out and scruffy, hair well past regulation length, cheekbones sharp beneath taught skin. The image is overlaid atop Taksa’s figure creating a grotesque amalgamation of our features. Taksa smiles, and the pleasure seems genuine.

“Something to be happy about?” I ask him.

“Just glad you’ve reached a point at which you might be amenable to changing your mind,” he says, and I almost throw my plan out the window right there and tell him to go fuck himself.

“I’ve got a few compelling reasons to try being more open-minded.”

“So you do. I’ll give you one more: What would you say if I told you that we could put an end to this continual bloody war?” I laugh at the grandiose notion that a few men could make such a significant difference.

“Is that your plan, turn me with an impossible dream? Sympathy for the devil?”

“I thought you were being open-minded. Humor me, just for a moment. If you don’t like what I have to say we can go back to our usual routine.” Well, when he puts it that way. Can’t play too hard to get or I might lose my chance.

“Fine, that would be lovely, obviously. What’s your plan to end a war that’s been fought since before I was born then? Burn down the whole forest? The legislature would never allow it, and every other nation would turn on us if we did.”

“Quite the opposite, a surgical strike at the minds that perpetuate this conflict.”

“We’ve never managed to find the heads of the Forest resistance, if we did I’m sure you and your boys would have hunted them all down by now.”

“The Foresters, *termites* some refer to them as, are not the ones that keep this going. *We* do. The government officials that hide at home in their bunkers, deciding who will die for their aims.”

My brain shorts out at the magnitude of his implication. I expected some sort of monetary gain for him and his men. Perhaps personal ties to the Forest. Is he actually claiming to be committing treason in the name of patriotism?

“You’re . . . serious?” I ask at last.

“Deadly,” he says.

“And the package?”

“Paper documents detailing the travel plans and security fallbacks of the high level donors bankrolling pro-war politicians.” He delivers that line as though killing civilians is the most obvious solution in the world. Now that I think about it, it might be the only fast solution.

“Because if you kill the politicians you’ll just make them martyrs,” I think out loud.

“And radicalize the nation by creating panic via the attacks on their own soil. You understand,” he finishes my thought.

“Why paper copies?”

“It was the only way to transfer the information to this place without leaving a trail. Yes, I see the irony in it.”

“You could have told me this before making me torture my men.”

“You might not have taken me seriously. Now, there can be no doubt in your mind the lengths I will go to for this. We have *all* lost too much, too much to this war. If I have to kill a few civilians to save our nation’s future I will do so. Make no mistake, it will be me and mine that commit this act. The package will never see Forester hands unless they find it while you stand in my way.”

“How did you get the information in the first place?”

“No more questions, Sergeant. It’s time to make another choice: tell me where the package is, or I will grind you down until you break and tell me anyway. Your men will be the cost. But if you tell me, I will release you all after the plan is complete. You’ll be treated well in



the meantime, and of no consequence afterwards. Even if you tell the world at that point, I will be the villain, not the Forest and its people.”

If the man is telling the truth, then his motives aren't selfish, and he shouldn't want to cause undue harm to the others. I believe him when he says he'll break me if I continue to resist, the only question is whether he can do it before the information in the package becomes irrelevant, and how many of my men will die in the process. I've never been a gambling man. Time to change that.

“Okay, I can't explain where it is, but I can take you to it.”

“Why can't you just tell us?”

“I was turned around when the lieutenant and I hid it, but I'll recognize the place if you take me back.” It's a simple lie, but a good one. It gives me time to think and gives them little room to find flaws in my story. Boru is the only one who saw where I was hiding when Taksa killed my lieutenant, he's the only one who knows I was on the wrong side of that clearing, too close to the fighting to have come from anywhere else. Taksa thinks for a long minute.

“Very well, we'll leave in an hour. If you try anything, everyone you care about will die. Not just your men here, but your wife too. We can reach her easily enough. Assuming you still care about her in light of your indiscretions.”

It's odd to feel judged by a man plotting treason; it somehow brings more guilt to know that a man with so few lines would still hesitate to cross that one.

“We'll leave in an hour,” he says. The window closes and I'm left in the white room to wonder what I've just done.

## Chapter XI: The moral high ground

I can't even see the outline of the door before it slips into the floor just as the walls have, the hidden machinery of the contraption so well oiled that it doesn't make a sound. I am not met by Taksa, or even Chokey, on the other side of the doorway, but two spooks whose faces I only vaguely recall. I step out into the hall to meet them. They put handcuffs on my wrists, tightening them until they bite into my skin. If I live long enough to get out of them I'll have some nasty marks left over from the experience. I find the thought more irritating than I expected, given the circumstances. Insult atop incalculable injury.

They take me down the hallway, one in front, the other behind. Overkill for a single malnourished soldier, but I suppose that's what they're trained for. How many of the soldiers here know about Taksa's endgame? It can't be all of them. I don't want to believe that many people were brought into this plan without word getting out. Then again, maybe this isn't *just* Taksa's plan. Someone had to get him the information in the package, which means someone with access to it is in on the plan . . . or at least willing to divulge sensitive information, whether through bribery, patriotism, or duress. I'd bet on the last option, considering Taksa's threat against my wife.

I'm still pondering the depth of the conceit within my nation's government when another spook turns a corner and approaches from the other end of the hallway. This one is wearing his cover indoors, brim pulled low over his eyes. Then I see the limp in his leg. My guards see it too, but the split-second hesitation was all the advantage Boru needed to close the distance.

A knife passes through the carotid artery of the man in front of me, blood sprays across my face. I'm unfazed after all the cycles of blood coating my body. It's not normal, but it doesn't

make me jerk the way it would have before the experience. The blood also finds its way past me and into the face of the man at the rear of our little line. Not all spooks are imperturbable it seems, because the sensation of blood entering his open mouth triggers his gag reflex, and at that point Boru is on him and it's over.

“With me,” Boru says, and takes off down the hallway in the direction I've just come from. I hesitate for a moment when he turns his back, the instinct to attack the man that killed Havcoff threatening to overwhelm me. I force it down, right now Boru is my only chance to save what's left of my team. With my hands restrained as they are, I doubt I could exact the justice Havcoff deserves anyway. Black hate burning in my stomach, I make myself follow Boru.

“What about my people?” I demand, struggling to keep up after all the time couped up in the white room.

“Already waiting for us,” responds Boru without turning around.

“How'd you get them out without alerting the base?”

“Do you want me to stop and explain this to you, or do you want to get out of here?” I shut up and follow him, reminding myself that I have to be patient for my men.

Boru leads us through a series of short hallways, until we come to a security door like the one I saw in the admin bunker. Boru taps a blank section of wall next to it and the wall slides open to reveal a keypad which is adjacent to a card reader. Boru pulls a plastic card that's speckled with blood out of his pocket, swipes it through the reader, wipes it clean on his uniform blouse, swipes it through again, and steps through the door before it's finished sliding open. When it shuts behind us, Boru opens another section of wall, revealing another keypad and card reader. He uses the same knife he killed the spooks with a minute ago to pry it off the wall and rip the wiring out. It takes him less than thirty seconds all told.

“Been planning this for a while?” I ask. I don’t expect an answer and I’m not disappointed when I don’t receive one. Better I don’t talk anymore anyway, I’m already growing short of breath. As we continue on I realize that we’ve entered into the underground tunnel system. Being so close to Boru after the initial burst of adrenaline has settled somewhat is giving rise to a different sort of instinct to hurt the man. It’s not the fast reflexive sort, but something more drawn out, torturous, akin to the cycles I’ve spent in the white room. The desire to cause pain tingles through my arms to my fingertips. I almost shudder trying to suppress it. Boru seems to sense the tremor in me, because he looks back for the first time, taking in my expression. I expect him to offer some sort of plea, or apology.

“Hurry up, we’re running out of time.” On cue, we hear boots tramping down a distant tunnel. Not every spook moves with the predatory efficiency Chokey possesses, which is a blessing as the sounds of the many feet in combat boots serve to drown out my own clumsy flight towards one of the outer exit hatches.

Boru goes up the ladder first, leaving me exposed at the bottom of the wedge of hallways, casting anxious glances down each in turn. Before it’s my turn to scramble up after Boru, a tremendous boom rolls across the base from outside the hatch, followed by shouting. Boru motions me up after him before disappearing through the hatch to the outside, unfazed by the explosion. Negotiating the ladder rungs made even more awkward by the cuffs biting into my wrists. Before I can stand at the top, Boru yanks me to a prone position and drags me through a hole he’s cut in the perimeter fence. Whatever the explosion was, it pulled enough of the perimeter guards’ attention away that they don’t see us dash into the treeline.

Several dozen meters in, Boru stops. Producing a pair of bolt cutters, he cuts the handcuffs off of me, opting to cut through each wrist shackle rather than the chain linking them.

The bending of the metal before it breaks draws bloody furrows in my skin. I'm too out of breath from all the exertion to cry out and opt to fall to my knees instead. Boru lifts me up and half-carries half-guides me forwards. After what feels like half a kilometer I shove him away.

"What. About. The others?" I get out between gasps. Boru glances away in answer.

"You left them?" I try to yell, but he clamps an iron hand over my mouth.

"I went to get them, Taksa killed them as soon as you said you'd give him the package."

The knowledge hits me like a sledgehammer to my diaphragm, taking me to my knees. The expression on Boru's face says he knew this was coming and waited to tell me until we were out of the base for that reason. He bends down to speak to me eye-to-eye.

"You can get up and walk with me, or I can carry you, either way we're leaving. Now."

I drag myself to my feet with the aid of a nearby tree, then follow Boru on weak knees. He leads me through the woods for another klick, aggravation at our slow pace dominating his features. When we finally break out onto what might have once been bravely considered a road he stuffs me into the backseat of a Humvee and tells me to keep my head down before churning mud down the path. Peeking over the edge of the window reveals many broken saplings that Boru must have run down to get the vehicle as close to the base as he did without using the primary roads leading to the base. Boru sees me looking and snaps at me to get my head down.

"Why'd you do it?" I ask him over the rattling of the Humvee.

"Help you? Because Colonel Taksa is deranged and everyone working with him needs to be stopped. That package is the evidence I need to be able to go to the higher-ups."

"No, why'd you kill Havcoff?" The silence that follows is long enough that I don't think I'm going to get an answer. Finally,

“He was trying to kill me. If I died, you’d all die anyway. It was an unfortunate necessity, and one I’ll pay the price for when all of this is done. If that price is your revenge, so be it.”

“It’s not revenge,” I say. “It’s justice,” but if Boru hears me, he gives no indication and we continue on in relative silence, broken only when I’m instructed to dig gear out of the back and strap in. I do, and no sooner am I done than the staccato pounding of mounted machine gun fire thunders from the road behind us. The trees on the passenger side of the vehicle splinter and crack, chips of bark and wood exploding outwards to perforate the nearby leaves and bombard our vehicle’s exterior. Boru swerves in the opposite direction, but too late, our pursuer’s large caliber rounds shred one of the rear tires causing our humvee’s swerve to turn into a full skid, ending with the heavy vehicle blocking the road.

When we stop, so does the machine gun fire. Only aiming to kill the vehicle, not its inhabitants, or me at least. The spooks hunting us stop their own vehicle, presumably to pursue us on foot. Boru is out of our vehicle and opening the rear door to pull me after him. Together, we take off running through the trees and underbrush at the side of the road, relying on its cover to keep us out of the sights of spook weapons. We sprint full out for several minutes before Boru holds up a hand for us to stop. I take advantage of the pause to catch my breath, sipping water from a canteen attached to my plate carrier. I appreciate the protection it offers, but the added weight is slowing me down too much. I realize if I’m going to be able to keep this up in my weakened state I need to ditch it.

Boru protests when he sees me unclasping the so-recently donned armor, but he gives up when I tell him I can’t keep going fast enough to keep ahead of our hunters. He may figure that they probably won’t shoot with the intent to kill me anyway, or he may just not want to make the noise necessary to argue with me with enemies so close. I take another gulp of water before

dumping the carrier. I keep the carbine I took from the humvee, though I didn't have time to collect extra magazines before we left it which means I only have thirty rounds. Thirty rounds, against a base full of special forces. Impossible odds, even with Boru.

When we move again I leave the water behind too. It's awkward to carry without the webbing on the plate carrier to fasten it to, and if we don't get another vehicle after securing the case there's no point anyway. A lone canteen won't see me across the dozens or even hundreds of kilometers of forest we'd have to cover on foot to reach friendly territory. I race behind Boru, my lightened load allowing me to keep pace better than before, aided by my muscles warming up to the activity. I don't know how long this second wind will last, but I hope it's enough to get us away from Taksa's spooks.

Boru seems to have other ideas. We've been running for almost half an hour and I can tell I don't have much more in me when he stops again. His head cocks as he strains to listen past the sounds of my breathing.

"This isn't going to work," he decides. He starts handing me gear: a compass, map, his spare canteen, and his sidearm.

"We're here," he says, pointing to a location on the map. How he knows where we are so well I can only guess. "The place your platoon was hit is here." He points to another spot. "Keep this heading—" He marks it on the compass, "—and you'll reach it in about ten kilometers."

I'm a seasoned land navigator, and when I double-check his work I find its accuracy uncanny. How familiar he must be with the Forest around that base is a terrifying concept.

"Where are you going?"

"To lead them off. If we keep going like this, even if we do beat them there, we won't be able to escape once we do. The Humvee is blocking the only road to that position in the area,

going around will slow them down considerably, but you still need to hurry. I'll meet you there if I can, if not there is a cache of emergency supplies here—" He pulls out a marker and puts a cross through another area of the map. "—wait for me there for two hours. If I don't come by then, use the supplies to get back to a standard base."

Without another word Boru crashes off through the trees, making far more noise than he was when we were moving together, even more noise than I was making. I watch his back disappear, almost hoping the spooks catch the man regardless of what it would mean for me. I set off in the direction indicated by the compass, trying to make as little noise as possible, and to avoid leaving any obvious broken branches or footprints in my wake.

The wisdom of Boru's decision is evident when I have to slow to a quick march pace after just a few more kilometers, even with the lighter load after dumping most of my gear. There was no way we could have stayed ahead of the fit and conditioned spooks for the entire distance to the package. It would have been difficult even if I were in better condition.

Seeing the shadows cast by what sunlight makes it this far down to the forest floor shift across the leaves around me, I have to wonder how long I was in the white room. How many cycles was it? How many times did I sleep and for how long? That line of thought reminds me that I'm the only one who made it out. Anger and despair war for position at the forefront of my emotions. I stoke the anger, using its motivating heat to drive me forward. The despair can come later with its paralyzing weight after this is finished and I can let myself stop. I don the fragments of my sergeant's mask one more time. Sergeant of what, I'm not sure; memories perhaps. In respect to the men and women I failed, and to a boy who deserved better. I start jogging again, branches striking my face when I'm forced to look down to avoid placing my feet wrong in the uneven carpet of roots and vines that crawl across the forest floor. My skin tears, sweat dripping



into the small cuts and abrasions. The stinging takes my mind off of the burning in my lungs, in my legs, the aches in my knees and back, the thousand other complaints of a body abused beyond its years.

I stop to drink water, taking care to sip and not gulp. I've heard it's better for you to sip, but really I'm just rationing what I have. One canteen to carry me the long kilometers to the package, and then further to the supplies cache. For once I'm grateful for the Forest's consistent efforts to prevent the sun's warmth from touching me. I keep moving.

By the time I see the plateau I'm drenched in perspiration. With shaking hands I take another sip from the lone canteen. It's less than half full now. I recap it and stick it into one of the deep pouches on my left thigh. Before I can approach the plateau a flash of movement around its edge stops me in my tracks. It's a humvee, pulling to a stop at the base of the elevation. Chokey steps out of it, along with a team of spooks. One of them starts giving orders I can't make out, but the results are obvious. The team fans out in different directions, disappearing one by one into the trees. The last member, the one who gave the orders, throws some sort of grappling hook up to the top of the plateau and uses it to scale his way to the top and assume an overwatch position. Once he's settled in I realize that if I hadn't seen him go up I would never know he's there, even with the vehicle below him denoting the presence of a threat.

Unable to go through the open area along the road without giving myself away, I'll have to travel along the perimeter until I reach it. The perimeter now filled with three well-trained spooks. What's more, the spook who disappeared into the trees between me and my destination was Chokey.

I can't wait to move though, it will just give their reinforcements more time to arrive. I have to get past Chokey, and I have to do it either quickly enough or quietly enough that it doesn't draw the rest of his team to me. If that happens my slim odds will slip down to zero.

My only advantage is the density of the forest, and it's naturally significant level of ambient noise. A small mammal leaping from branch to branch can sound quite similar to a man putting his foot through an especially dense patch of brambles or vines. It's a thin advantage, mitigated further by Chokey's training and familiarity with the terrain, but I cling to it with each step I take. I move back ten meters into the woods, well past the point where the spook on overwatch has any chance of seeing me through the visual obstructions, and only then do I start my slow arch around the plateau and its encircling road. If I knew the terrain better, and if I knew I had more time, I'd just walk a kilometer back and come back around to the exact point lieutenant gave me directions from, the place I saw him die. I can't be sure of where that is from my current position on the wrong side of the plateau though, and even with the map and compass, the possibility of getting lost in the depths of the Forest without any landmarks to establish my position via terrain association is too great.

I creep along, keeping my head down and my weapon at a low ready position, carbine muzzle slipping between small branches and drooping leaves ahead of my comparatively bulky torso. I try to use my peripheral vision to avoid stepping on anything loud, but with the clutter of the forest floor, I'm forced to rely on the ambient noise and plurality of sound-absorbing surfaces to conceal my movements through the environment.

I wonder if Chokey and the rest of the spooks nearby will maintain hidden positions from which they can view the plateau, or if they're patrolling. If it were my men, separated and hunting an armed quarry, I would have them conceal themselves to split the difference between

covering more ground and exposing themselves to danger. My men aren't spooks though, don't—*didn't* have the same training that spooks do. No, Chokey is moving. Spooks wouldn't risk letting me slip past them by staying in a position necessarily close to the edge of the road and the plateau. That knowledge makes every step I take feel like I'm cheating death.

The trees crawl by. I have no real sense of how long it's taking me to move from one to the next, only that I *am* making progress. Stopping every time I hear a twig snap or a branch drift in the almost nonexistent breeze. The thought that I haven't felt a stiff wind since coming to the forest because of all the trees blocking it flits across my mind, and the ludicrous nature of missing a cool breeze while I'm sneaking through the shadowy undergrowth of the Forest with a team of expert killers hunting me makes me want to sit down and laugh.

I don't. I keep going.

I begin to recognize the gradual darkening of my surroundings, and I hear the high keening of one of the local owls waking to hunt. The sound is distant, but its abrupt interruption of the Forest noises I'm accustomed to almost causes me to fire my weapon. Night patrols are, by nature, more dangerous, so I haven't been on as many, and none this deployment. My instinct for what sounds mean danger is limited, rusty. The sounds I'm accustomed to are fading away, being replaced by the softer, somehow malicious reverberations of the Forest nightlife.

Making a judgment call, I move faster. I have no night vision or thermal equipment, not even a flashlight. If I'm still out here alone when full dark hits, I'm dead. There's no way I can find the package at night, let alone do so quietly enough to get past the spooks.

It's the wrong choice.

I break into a fast walk and no sooner have I started than the owl keens again, right overhead. I jerk my head up in alarm, not seeing the protruding root nestled in the deep shade of

the Forest evening. I crash to a prone position, barely managing to get my weapon out in front of me so it doesn't cave my teeth in on impact.

Bullets rip across the place that would have been my center of mass if I hadn't fallen, pulverizing the flora above me. Worse, I hear the distinct report of a carbine from two directions at a wide-angle from one another. I was wrong, the spooks aren't moving alone.

I don't move. I barely breathe. I just lie and listen. If I make noise, if I disturb the plants around me and make them shift overhead, I'm dead. So I wait with cold sweat rolling down my neck for my only chance. An eternity passes by in the space of three breaths. I sense it, the chance, a notion so faint and obscure I'm not even sure which of my five senses it originated from, but I act on it. I flip to my back, thumbing my weapon to fully automatic fire and cutting it through the air like a sword, relying on its absurd rate of fire to saturate the zone my lizard brain is telling me contains one of my hunters.

A scream cut short into a gurgle tells me at least one round has found its mark in such a way that the number of my pursuers has been reduced by one. Hoping I've only wounded the man so that a second spook will have to tend to his injuries, I flip back to my stomach and use the momentum to launch myself sidelong through a bush before the source of the second weapon's fire can close on my previous position. Then I lay still again. Even though I've only moved a couple of meters at most, in the clutter of the underbrush it may have been enough. Another slim hope.

I lay still once more, waiting for the return of that instinct that saved me last time, of that amalgamation of senses and luck that let me fell an opponent I would never in a hundred years have beaten under different circumstances. It doesn't come. My mind races to take in everything around me, senses almost overloaded with input. The shifting of trees and their branches, of the

shadows beneath them, of the owl's screeching and the chittering of small rodents as they flee from the predator above them. The choked moans from the spook I shot filter through the trees, and I realize that from that direction there are no animal sounds. That direction, and one other. I spray the last of my magazine into the other silence. The bolt on my carbine locks forward with a clack, and a surprised huff responds to the barrage of armor-piercing bullets. Knowing I don't have time and ignoring the survival instincts screaming in my mind I bull through the underbrush towards the man I know I've just killed. Chokey is slumped against a tree, bright red blood drips from his lips, and the darker sort that heralds death running in streams down his chest from a duo of entry wounds. He looks up at me, a tear running across the new scar which mars his cheek, and moves on from the world in the same way he moved through it—in silence.

## Chapter XII: Daisy Chain

I'm sprinting away from Chokey's body. I took only a moment to close his eyes and strip him of his weapon. His radio was no good, one of my bullets destroyed it. A one in a hundred chance that it would be hit, and it was. No point bemoaning its lost potential now. Chokey, whatever else he'd done, gave me a chance in his death. That chance makes itself heard when the hasty IED I rigged with his grenades detonates behind me. Hopefully, that will buy me enough time to get where I'm going. It will certainly cover the sounds of my mad dash to my destination.

Moving at full speed it takes me only moments to reach the clearing where my lieutenant was murdered. His body is gone, recovered by soldiers or dragged off by animals, I don't know. I stop only long enough to read the compass, and then I'm walking. I have to bite my lip until I taste blood to keep myself from running. My only indication of distance is the lieutenant's pace count, and his legs are longer than mine so even that's only an estimation. I add twenty to the count for good measure. It takes me over a third of a kilometer before I hit the number.

Now I'm scrambling around, looking for the log with the red moss. I think I've found it at least four times, ripping old dead trunks from the ground and finding nothing. I don't even know if I'm still near the place I ended my count, each log taking me a little further from where I think my origin point was.

I'm manic, spitting blood trying to get the taste out of my mouth. I don't know how I thought I was used to it just a few hours ago, that cloying metallic flavor coating my tongue, my teeth, even the insides of my cheeks. The spitting does nothing but make me feel even more a madman than I already must be. In my mania I almost step on a disturbed patch of soil, realizing at the last moment that it's another of the traps like the one that almost killed me when I was

chasing this case the first time. Once I notice it, I can see the telltale signs of more disturbed soil, probably hiding wires running to other explosives.

Then, mostly out of frustration, I kick a fallen and rotted tree, splintering the fragile bark and sending a spray of decayed bark and orange moss into the air. Beneath is a protective case, silver exterior a dull gray in the final vestiges of Forest daylight. My hands shake when I pick it up, hardly believing that I've finally found what my damaged brain has been searching for since waking up from that explosion. I open the case. The papers are inside, undamaged, protected from the elements by the case since my apparently colorblind lieutenant secreted them away.

"Thank you, Sergeant Kent, you've saved me and my men a considerable amount of time in finding that for us."

Of course. I turn around, one hand continuing to hold the case, the other bringing Chokey's weapon up to brace against my hip. It won't be accurate, but Taksa is only a few meters away, lower-half concealed behind brush, face as emotionless as ever. Spooks begin to appear from the trees, fading into view around him, around me. There's no way out. I don't lower my weapon.

"Give me a reason not to," I say, finger tightening on the trigger.

"Even if you kill me it won't make a difference. You'll just be adding two more bodies to the count. Mine *and* yours. You can still walk away from this."

"One of those bodies killed my friends." He wouldn't actually let me go after all this, would he? He's a traitor, but he believes he's doing what's right.

"Boru did that, and now he's paid for it. Did you think those explosions that covered your escape were random? He knew you'd never leave while I had your men, while I had your lover." The last word spikes a pang of hurt and guilt in me, and the weight of it makes the arm holding

Chokey's weapon tip, just a little. I force it back up, eyes darting around for any way out, another one in a million chance like the ones that got me here, anything. There's nothing. Just trees, and plants, and the dying light of another day in the Forest.

"You still made me hurt them."

"You chose that, rather than giving me that case, which I'll have anyway. If it's any consolation, this will save thousands of lives. Lives belonging to people you know, I'm sure."

Did I choose it? Some part of me had to have known this was inevitable, that I couldn't keep this case from all these spooks on my own. Had I deluded myself into torturing the people I cared most for?

"This is your chance to live to redeem yourself of that decision," Taksa's saying, "You can help me save all those other lives, then live to make things right with your wife. Think of Maria, she'll be shattered if she hears that you've died. She's a good woman, we've been watching her since you came into contact with our unit. She deserves to have her husband come home to her, you can still be the man she deserves." His words finally penetrate my frantic brain. I feel the tension leave me, and the adrenaline begins to die down. Calm rushes in to fill the vacuum left by the electricity of fight and flight.

"You're right," I say. I stumble forward on legs weak with exhaustion. Now that I've stopped fighting the events that some part of me has always realized needed to happen my body is telling me to lay down, to recover. Not yet, I just need to make it a few more steps. I drop Chokey's weapon, clicking the safety on and letting it fall muzzle first into the dirt and grime of the Forest's floor. Taksa doesn't smile, but something about him softens, and the look on his face is something like empathy, like he knows what all this has cost me and wants to help.

"Pass me the case, Sergeant, and this can all be over. You can go home."



I hesitate a few steps from him, looking at how a lonely beam of sunlight cuts across his face and makes his eyes shine.

“I can still be the man Maria deserves,” I say.

“Yes,” Taksa says, reaching a hand out for the case.

I lift the case towards him in my leaden arms.

“Even if she never knows it,” I finish and, watching the gossamer remnants of sunlight disappear from Taksa’s face, drop the case on top of the disturbed soil of the forest floor between us.

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**Biography of the Author:**

Stephen Thomas Krichels was born in Blue Hill, ME, in early May of 1996. He graduated from George Stevens Academy in 2014, going on to earn his B.A. from the University of Maine in 2018, majoring in Political Science and English with a concentration in Creative Writing. He spent the following two years with an assistantship teaching Intro to Composition Studies at the University of Maine. He is a candidate for the Masters of the Arts degree in English from the University of Maine in May 2020.