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Guardians of Freedom

Drew Davis

Butler University, davisandrew01@gmail.com

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Guardians of Freedom

By Drew Davis

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Guardians of Freedom

Part One: The Memorial of Sergeant Henry

Drew Davis

Two days after Howell suck-started his pistol in the bathtub of the Motel 6, Eugene Henry was slumped against the window of a school bus. The returning members of Charlie company, all but Henry, were asleep, exhausted from six months in a war zone and sixteen hours of transport. Henry fought the fatigue though; his sleep had been plagued with nightmares for the past three months and his nightmares were plagued with unoriginality. He was tired enough to risk it though and planned to spend his two weeks post-deployment leave in bed, equal parts sleeping and treating himself to deep and self-pitying depression. But not until he was officially returned. So only Henry and the driver were awake 0530 as the bus slowed, shifted gears, and turned off of Stiggins Lane and onto the street that would take the veterans to their families and home.

The street was unnamed. It had a blank, green signpost at the corner, and an unfinished plaque at the base. At the sight of it, a familiar icy fear oozed through Henry.

He had spent almost three years as a Specialist in the Army. He didn't know what to make of most of it, but he was certain that he never wanted anything on a military base named after him. The streets on Fort Roth had names like Martin Lane, Eddings Boulevard. The buildings had names like the Nathan P. Vasquez Information Center, Elliot L. Ruiz Foreign Language Lab. Every motor pool, barracks, dining facility were named after Fort Roth combat losses. A road map of Fort Roth read like a cemetery plot. The unnamed street that led to

barracks and companies of the 10th and 11th Propaganda Opposing Enemy Propaganda battalions, Henry knew, was an annoyance to the higher-ups who couldn't understand why one of their own wouldn't just die so they could be honored properly.

To Henry, the unnamed road seemed like a promise when he left. He never expected he had the ability to come back from a war and was shocked when he did. Specialist Henry was slight, bent, and thin. His knees and elbows popped out of his skinny limbs like obscene growths, his skin was pale and showed the blue of his veins, his nose bulged out from beneath beady eyes and was as large as it was useless. Henry had chronic sinus issues. The fact that he had lived through a combat tour was agreeable but offended Henry's sense of order.

But there he was, watching a work truck pull up to the signpost and hearing the stir of soldiers coming home from war. Charlie Company wasn't the only group to return to Fort Roth. A brood of cicadas, finally above ground for the first time in 17 years, loitered and chattered over everything. The bugs pecked against the windows of the bus like sporadic rain. The other soldiers stirred and caused the seat covers to emit little plastic squeaks and farts. The squeaks woke other soldiers who nudged their seat partners. By the time the bus passed the Elliot T. Lopez POEP Barracks and Housing Facility the whole bus was awake, sandy-eyed and quiet. Henry turned to wake Staff Sergeant Highsmith, seated beside him, but Sergeant Highsmith was already awake and looking back at Henry. The Sergeant blinked, Henry debated the merits of saying something, decided against it.

He never knew what really to say to Highsmith, but knew everything to say about him. Whispers and second-hand accounts followed the man every time he limped away from a group of soldiers. He had been to every war, conflict, intervention, engagement, and peace-keeping

operation the country has been in since the late 80s. He was all of 45 years old. He looked like his first commanding officer was Washington.

Highsmith grunted when the bus stopped in front of Charlie Company with a squelch of brakes and an overlong hydraulic hiss. Standing caused a symphony of groans and cracking bones. Highsmith grabbed his duffel bag, rifle, and Henry did the same. The 40 POEP soldiers filed out of the bus to tepid applause and low-register cheers from a sparse crowd of family members. The cheers were mixed with stifled yawns. Wives and husbands and children were reunited with their husbands or wives or parents with perfunctory hugs and squeals. Returning from deployment was only a new thing to Henry, who had no one waiting. He stood off to the side with Highsmith.

“Family?” Highsmith asked, a heavy drawl on his voice. Highsmith was a Texan like, it seemed to Henry, most of the goddamn Army. Henry didn’t know if he should credit Texans with patriotism, or suicidal tendencies. They were the same to Henry.

“No thank you.” Highsmith nodded. “You?” Henry asked.

Highsmith scratched his head. “Told ‘em they could wait for next time,” he said and

The hugs were released. The soldiers and families separated in two uneven lines, each with a “what now” look about them. Henry knew he had the same look, and why shouldn’t he? He was holding his rifle against his chest with one hand, the other slowly going numb by the weight of his duffel bag. He was staring at the trees behind the Company.

There wasn’t anything special about the trees. Henry never had any special relationship with trees and even at his most charitable viewed nature as a benign obstacle on the way to the next city. They weren’t even particularly handsome trees, just some evergreens full of gray needles and cicadas.

It was just that he hadn't seen one in six months.

Without knowing, he was ambling towards the trees like, shivering in the early morning heat. And with that the anxiety and panic that he had held back like vomit seeped into his brain, smashing apart long held notions about war, life, simple right-and-wrong. He felt a challenge to his very being.

It was terribly annoying.

"Henry. Henry! Jesus," Highsmith said. Henry stopped and saw his Sergeant. "Are you okay?" Without waiting for an answer he said "go turn in your weapon." Henry's head pumped up and down. He turned towards the company when Highsmith said "and tighten up your shot group. We're back in garrison now."

Chapter One

Henry was paranoid, and coming back from a land where half the people didn't care if he lived or died and the other half cared too much only made his condition worse. The new manifestation of his psychosis came after he signed his rifle into the arms locker. Feeling tired and lonely and walking back to outside, he felt someone watching him.

He just knew someone was following him through the empty halls of Charlie Company. He knew he was being followed because the woman who was doing the following assured him that she wasn't doing what she was doing. She looked nonchalant and dismissed Henry's paranoia before ducking behind a corner, behind a trash can, under a desk.

"You just happen to be going where I'm heading," she said from behind the open door of a locker, her boots and a sleeve of her ACUs visible.

"And where is that?"

"Remind me."

Against the lessons of years of military experience and his better judgment, Henry attempted logic. "Look, I'm too tired to fight, can you just admit you're following me?"

"That would go against orders."

"Which ones?"

"The ones that say I have to follow you."

He sighed. "Can you order me to forget you told me?"

There was a pause. “I don’t outrank you right now. I’ve been temporarily demoted so as to gain your trust and not arouse suspicion.”

Henry didn’t think he’d get any farther with the locker and headed for the door. He heard the squeak of boots behind him.

Outside, Ski watched the families fold up their yellowed “welcome home” signs and brush away cicadas. When he saw Ski, he saw his friend’s fleshy face sunk in disappointment.

Specialist Evan Paderewski, forever Ski, was waiting for Henry outside of Charlie Company. Henry could see his roommate hadn’t slept, looked miserable. Henry knew that this was a good start to Ski’s day. Ski was never comfortable with contentment. Victory made him nervous, happiness made him uneasy, and he hated all the things he loved. Ski never knew what to do with any good mood that happened across him; he was more accustomed to misery, and was dogged in his pursuit of it.

“I thought you were dead,” Ski said. “You just ruined my day.”

“Why would I be dead?”

“Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Fair point. How’s Roth been without me?” Henry asked.

Ski sighed wistfully. “Miserable. How was war?”

“Wouldn’t know.”

He dug through his Army Combat Uniform, which was never to be worn in combat. Ski wore his uniform two sizes too small. His girth was bulged out of the folds like a burst can of biscuits. As he pulled out a mass of folded papers, Henry saw the Battalion duty van pull up and

deposit Colonel Stoops. The battalion commander went about shaking hands and patting shoulders, a PFC loaded down with small decorative boxes following behind.

“Welcome back to Bravo 10th,” Ski said, handing Henry his orders. “You’re too report,” Ski checked his watch, “In ten minutes.”

It was the first good news Henry had all day. He had only been borrowed by Charlie, and never felt that he fit in, where the soldiers were brave and resolute. He did so in Bravo Company, where the broken brigade of POEP Command, where the soldiers deemed too ill, injured, or unmotivated to go off to shoot and get shot at where hidden away.

“I have another one for Highsmith. And a third for,” he squinted at the orders “the name’s blanked out.”

Highsmith limped up to Ski and Henry, took his orders. “Tell First Sergeant I’ll be at Lewis,” he said without breaking his truncated stride.

“Don’t worry about mine. I have a copy,” the woman who was following Henry said. For a moment Henry saw an emaciated woman with short hair before she vanished behind a nearby family.

“Who was that?” Ski asked.

Henry shook his head. “Let’s just go.”

“Wait. I think you’re about to be decorated.”

Henry saw that the commanders’ rounds found their way to him. Henry gave a resigned salute, and the Colonel returned it, his wrist bound by a heavy cast. “Specialist Henry, for your dedicated and tireless service to Charlie Company, which has led to the success of the most

recent mission in the Global War on Terror, I am proud to bestow on you the Army Commendation Medal and your campaign ribbon.” He motioned to his overloaded assistant who nodded to the stack of boxes she was carrying. Henry took one. “On behalf of the Propaganda Opposing Enemy Propaganda Command, I thank you, your brethren in arms thank you, and your country thanks you. Well done. Well done.”

The box was lined with navy blue felt, the medals gleamed in the early morning light. He ran a thumb over metal. It was a handsome set of trinkets, and the box closed with a satisfying thump. Henry looked up to thank the Colonel for the legitimate effort to recognize the danger he faced in the effort of an unachieved goal.

Henry didn’t want to be thanked. It had nothing to do with humility or duty; there was nothing to thank him for. However he was touched, for what it was. Henry’s stint at childhood athletics was filled with like-wise participation and “most improved” trophies. The awards were an annual humiliation to Henry and boost to those who gave them.

The Colonel had turned to Ski, did a quick check of the nametape. “Specialist Paderewski, for your dedication,” he began. The Colonel’s assistant cleared her throat and nodded to the clipboard on top of the boxes. Henry took it, signed the sheet acknowledging that the cost of the medals would be deducted from his next paycheck.

*

Ski and Henry both took hold of the handle of Henry’s tough box, a hard plastic monstrosity that stored his Army gear. They caught glimpses of the woman that was following Henry darting from behind cars in the parking lot. The box had little more than a suggestion of

wheels and about a hundred pounds of equipment in it. Henry and Ski were panting and sweating after hauling it the 40 yards to the Bravo Company back loading dock.

“You’re late. Get in formation,” First Sergeant Hurst grumbled. Henry was pleased to be back on base if only for the fact that he was coming back to a place where the people were only unintentionally trying to kill him, and none more than First Sergeant, who was a pile of ugly muscle squeezed into a pair of black shorts and a gray t-shirt that said “Army.” Ski and Henry dropped the box and took their place in formation. First Sergeant stood rigid, not making a move even to brush the dozen cicadas off his shoulders and torso.

They assumed parade rest, feet should-length apart, hands folded behind their backs, elbows at 45 degree angles. They were the only ones there. After dealing with months of sporadic sick-call appointments for his company, First Sergeant had declared that he would only allow appointments at Lewis Medical on Monday mornings.

“Specialist Paderewski,” First Sergeant said, checking the name against his duty roster.

“Here, First Sergeant,” Ski said.

“Specialist Howell,” First Sergeant said. Henry thought he remembered a Howell, but couldn’t quite nail it down. First Sergeant scanned both members of his formation. “Specialist Howell,” he said again. Henry looked out of the corner of his eye at Ski who was straining with his memory. “Specialist Stephen Howell,” First Sergeant said, a deep rumble that Henry knew indicated both anger and pleasure; First Sergeant hated tardiness and insubordination, but was never happier than when he knew he was going to get to punish someone.

“Has anyone seen Howell?”

Henry had a dull flash of recognition. Henry, Ski, and Howell, all came up through the same Basic Combat Training class, same Advanced Individual Training class, Airborne, and Language school. Henry hadn't spent more time with another single soldier in the Army than he did Howell and Ski, but the only memorable thing about Howell was how easily forgotten he was.

First Sergeant gave a contented grunt, stared at Henry. "Who are you?"

"Specialist Henry, transferring back from Charlie 11th," Henry said, somewhat offended that his brand of laziness and contempt towards the military were so easily dismissed.

"Good," First Sergeant said "we need bodies for deployment. Orders."

"Deployment?" Henry looked at Ski, who did his best to shrug while not moving.

"We're going to war, son. Three months.

"Am I on this deployment?" First Sergeant scowled until he added "First Sergeant?" The first sergeant nodded his bulldog head. Henry had kept himself too tired to feel for months but a familiar cold, needling sense of dread began to percolate in his stomach. "First Sergeant, I can't deploy, I just came back."

"Well obviously you didn't get all of it the first time. Orders."

Henry handed over his transfer orders and leave permission with numb fingers. First Sergeant grunted at the leave form. "All leave has been suspended due to necessary pre-deployment training."

"First Sergeant, that's my post-deployment leave. It's already been approved."

“Not by me, but you can take this to our training room NCO, Sergeant Prince, who will resubmit it for approval by the appropriate party.”

“Who would that be?”

“The Company First Sergeant. I don’t like your chances.” He handed back the leave form to Henry and inspected the transfer order.

“Henry? You sure you have the right form here, son.” Henry nodded. “Don’t lie to me. It’s against the law.” Henry looked around, puzzled. He opened his mouth to speak but First Sergeant cut him off. “Henry’s dead. Played tonsil-target practice two days ago. I booked the chapel for the memorial myself. Let’s see some ID.”

Henry presented his military ID. First Sergeant inspected it, inspected Henry, a frown tightened on his jowls, followed by a wide-eyed, lost look. He handed the card back to Henry and ran a hand through the stubble of hair on his head. A conflict of fact and doctrine always made First Sergeant uncomfortable.

“You better get to Lewis and have yourself checked out,” he said.

“Checked out for what?”

“Mortality.”

“I assure you I’m alive, First Sergeant.”

“I can’t take your word for it and I don’t want to argue with a corpse. You’ll be dismissed after Reverie.”

They stood in silence, waiting for the speaker outside Bravo Company to blare the recording. Henry sighed. He knew he should be stunned by the morning’s events, and was,

partially. More than shocked by the events, he was stunned by his own response. He had sighed and mentally prepared to do all the things no person should have to do. The first notes of the Reverie came over the speaker. First Sergeant ordered his formation to attention, ordered a right face and to present arms. When the Reverie, Retreat, or Taps played, a soldier was to face the nearest flag and salute. When no flag was present, soldiers faced the music. For Bravo Company, the music came from a broken speaker that emitted warbling notes, static, and squelches.

After the Reverie, the morning POEP Narrative message played. Specific to Fort Roth, the Narrative messages were to bring a boost of morale and positive spin on old news and new doctrine. On the morning Henry returned from war the message said:

“Good morning, guardians of freedom! POEP Command would like to welcome back a unit of its very own, Charlie Company, 10th Battalion is back and Fort Roth would like to say welcome back and good job. On another note, Fort Roth soldiers are to be congratulated on being the only active duty military installation not to have a marked increase in suicide for ranks E1-E4 in the past year. In Fort Roth’s continuing effort to prevent self-harm, this is a reminder that counseling services are available free of charge to all soldiers. For extra confidentiality, your command staff will be kept abreast of your condition.”

“Dismissed,” First Sergeant said as the speaker fell silent with a final pop. He took off at a sprint to the tree line behind the company, each swift step leaving a mangled cicada.

Ski and Henry dragged the tough box to Ski’s hatchback, neither speaking. The box wouldn’t allow speaking. The box wouldn’t fit in the trunk.

“Just leave it,” Henry said. Ski looked disappointed. “Ski? Am I dead?”

Ski looked at his friend. "I'm not that lucky," he said. It was the nicest thing Henry had heard all morning. They brushed the bugs off the car and climbed in. It started with a horrific grinding from the engine.

A knuckle rapped on Henry's window, followed by a muffled voice saying "can I catch a ride?"

*

Henry visited Lewis at least twice a month, and every time was glad that he wasn't sick. The place was a madhouse of inactivity. The lobby was the size of a football field, with three nurses' stations that guarded the doctors from the patients. Dozens of hopeful soldiers in black shorts and gray T-shirts that read "Army" milled about the lobby, waited in lines to be told to wait in other lines, or sat in the blue chairs and stared at the news. The televisions were muted, but that didn't seem to bother anyone. Towards the exit was the pharmacy, where soldiers collected their painkillers or M&M cocktail, Motrin and Mucinex which was given to soldiers for everything from a sinus infection to dislocated bones. They overheard the pharmacist warning Highsmith that his medication should not be taken with alcohol and that possession of his recommended dose is a felony in most states of the union.

The woman following Henry ducked into a group of soldiers who were waiting to have blood taken. He had caught a quick look at her face as she climbed into the car and before she could cover her face with her beret. Her face and hair were angular short, like she had cut it herself with dull scissors. She volunteered no information on the ride over.

Henry put it out of his mind, having little room left. They found Sergeant Prince slumped in a chair, head lulling to his side with a small amount of spittle leaking out. Prince had an

unknown ailment and was just the latest in a proud legacy of unknown ailments. His grandparents both suffered from separate but equal medical mysteries and had met as patients in a long-term ward. Their union pooled their illnesses into a single, more nuanced and complex and entirely new affliction. The pattern repeated with Prince's parents. The romances of the Prince line were always tempered with mild misery, which was better than most romances. Prince hoped to break the tradition by marrying a nice, reasonably healthy medical professional. He usually wore cologne and shaved for his monthly visit to Lewis but hadn't the day Henry got back from overseas. In fact, thought Henry, he looked worse than usual.

“You look worse than usual,” Ski said.

Prince, with effort, pulled his head up to look at Ski. “Thank you,” he said, “I'm really hoping for an admission this time.” A tired smile appeared on his face then slid off. “But it's probably just these new pills Doctor Carter has me on. He's very good.” He offered an orange bottle to Ski. Then he noticed Henry.

“Is it working?” Ski said.

“The side effects are.”

“Well that's encouraging,” Henry said.

Prince's face lost what little color it had left when Henry spoke. “Does it say hallucinations as a side-effect?” He asked Ski.

Ski scanned the bottle. “Yes.” He read aloud. “May cause audio/video hallucinations, heartburn, nausea, weight loss, weakness of the extremities, general discomfort, specific agony, and delayed night sweats.” He handed the bottle back. “What are delayed night sweats?”

“Morning sweats,” Prince said. On cue, his face shined with pellets of moisture.

“So I'm the only one who can see Henry, right?”

“No,” Ski said. “He’s back.”

“But he’s dead.”

“I promise you I’m not,” Henry said.

“Sorry, Henry, but I just can’t trust you, or Ski,” he sighed and hung his head. “Not when I’m on these pills.”

“Then why are you talking to him?” Ski asked.

Prince looked up, slightly offended. “Well I don’t want to be rude.”

Henry and Ski looked at each other, shrugged. While they were, they missed the darting figure of a woman in uniform take a seat behind them and pull a decade-old magazine in front of her face.

“Prince, First Sergeant said Bravo’s deploying,” Henry said.

“Yeah. I’m still holding out hope that’s another thing I imagined.”

“Am I on this deployment?”

Prince looked at Henry, scratched the patches of hair on his head. “Well, no. Dead people usually only come back from deployment.”

“That’s my concern.”

“But if you’re alive, which I’m sorry to say I can’t confirm, then yes, you will be going.”

“I just got back. Today. I can’t be on this deployment.”

“Today. Well that might be something,” Prince said, face contorting like he tasted something sour. He pulled out his phone. “A soldier is required to have 90 days rest before going from one deployment to another.”

“That’s good,” Henry said. “How many days until Bravo deploys?”

“91,” Prince said and collapsed in his seat, snoring before his lolling head came to a rest.

Ski looked at the bottle and spotted that stress-induced narcolepsy/insomnia was a listed side-effect.

Ski attempted to rouse Prince, but Henry waved him off and took to staring at the mural. Henry liked the mural. It was a beautiful thing to look at when one was terribly depressed. It wrapped around the whole room and depicted the advancements of war-time medicine chronologically. It took an hour for Henry and Ski, who had to carry Prince with each move, to get from the Civil War to World War II, from a painting of a man in a blood-stained apron applying a rusty saw to the leg of a man biting down on a bit of wood to the one of a medic in green—a big red cross on his helmet—applying morphine and gauze to a dazed soldier on the beaches of Normandy. That’s when the woman started tittering and lightly kicking the back of Henry’s seat.

Ski arched an eyebrow at Henry but didn’t speak. Henry liked a lot of things about Ski, but what he appreciated most was that Ski never messed up a good emotional crisis by trying to cheer him up.

Henry ground his teeth as they passed from Korea and onto Vietnam, and as the woman upgraded to clearing her throat and sighing.

“Are we just going to wait here all day?” she asked.

Henry turned back and spoke to the creased, paper face of Saddam Hussein. “Are we keeping you from something? Aren’t you supposed to be following me?”

“Not officially. But I’d prefer to not do it somewhere else. Waiting makes me anxious.”

“Being followed makes me anxious,” Henry said.

“That must be rough.”

“I like being anxious,” Ski said.

“Do you have any suggestions?” Henry asked.

“Hundreds,” she said. “But I was really hoping you could figure this one out yourself.”

“Figure what out?”

She let out a disgusted sigh and threw the magazine at Henry, hitting him square on his hooked nose and causing him to panic at the assault. “That in hospitals, matters of life and death come first.” When he recovered, Henry could see her stomping up to the nearest nurses’ station. He saw her gesturing towards Henry with flailing arms.

A moment later a doctor and three nurses trotted into the waiting area pushing a stretcher and crash cart. She gestured again and they hurried to where Henry, Ski, and Prince were seated.

“Everyone stay calm! I’m a doctor!” the doctor shouted, voice cracking. He grabbed the defibrillator paddles and pushed them towards Prince. The shouting and whirl of the machine powering up woke Prince who looked up hopefully when he was surrounded by medical professionals. The doctor stopped.

“Prince? You’re not dead,” he said. He looked at his nurses, who shrugged shoulders. “Where’s Specialist Henry?” Henry raised his hand. The nurses grabbed Henry and forced him to the stretcher.

“How long has he been like this?” The doctor asked Ski.

“Long as I’ve known him,” Ski said.

“I’m not dead,” Henry said.

“Calm down, you’re hysterical!”

The nurses squeezed an oxygen mask over his face, attached sensors on his fingers, and injected him with an IV directly through his sleeve. The doctor, fingers shaking, applied his stethoscope to his chest, right over his rank. Henry batted it aside and unzipped his blouse. The

doctor mouthed “thank you” and reapplied his instrument.

“I’ve got a pulse!”

The waiting room burst into applause.

*

Henry was wheeled into the bowels of Lewis to an observation room by the doctor. Still flushed with achievement, he went bouncing around the room while Henry took the various life-saving and monitoring equipment out of his body.

“I mean that was fantastic. Look, my hands are still shaking. I’m Doctor Carter by the way” he said to Henry, holding out a quivering hand to shake.

“Doctor Carter,” Henry said. “Prince says you’re very good.”

Carter took his hand away like he’d been burned. The color drained from his face and he flew to his rolling chair and pecked frantically at this computer. “I forgot about Prince. Goddammit. How’s he doing anyway?”

“Worse than I’ve ever seen him,” Henry said.

Carter swiveled around. “Really?” he asked, lighting up again. Henry nodded. “Is he hallucinating?”

“He thinks he is,” Henry said.

Carter clapped his hands. “Oh, this day just keeps getting better.” He turned back to his computer and pecked some more. “What sounds worse,” he asked without turning around “gastrointestinal disasters or intermittent incontinence?”

“The first one. Can I ask what you’re doing?”

“You certainly can.” Doctor Carter went back to typing. After a moment, Henry knew he wasn’t going to get his answer. With a final flurry of key strokes, Carter sent his document to

print and looked around the room. “You see a scalpel in here?”

Henry sat up on his stretcher, sending the sought instrument tumbling to the floor. Carter scooped it up and went about cutting the paper he’d printed. “Do you know anything about the placebo effect?” Carter asked. Henry said that he did. “Did you know that it is stronger in this country than anywhere in the world?” Henry admitted that he didn’t. “Do you think that’s a good or a bad thing?”

“Depends on how you look at it,” Henry said.

“Exactly. See I love the placebo effect, and I have no idea how to treat Prince. But, I had an idea.” He fished in a drawer and found an empty pill bottle. He carefully fit his paper on the bottle and taped it on, threw it to Henry. “What do you think?”

Henry caught the bottle, saw that it was almost identical to one Prince had earlier. It looked real enough. Carter unscrewed the top and poured in a handful of Tic-Tacs. He looked at Henry like a child seeking approval.

“But doesn’t knowing about the Placebo effect lessen it?” Henry asked. “Prince has been around enough to know about it. How do you think this will work?”

A finger waved in Henry’s face. “That’s the genius part, if I do say so myself. Sure, he doesn’t trust medication to work on him because no medication ever has. But.” He paused and looked at Henry sideways. “If I told you tomorrow that you would feel great, be at peace with the world, and that the sun would shine only for you, would you believe me?” Henry shook his head.

“Of course not. I’m lower enlisted.”

“But if I told you you’d wake with a crick in your neck, heartburn, and a general displeasure with living?”

“I see where this is going,” Henry said.

Carter pointed his finger right at Henry's face. "See, in order for Prince to make himself better, I have to convince him that he's getting worse."

"Do you think that'll work?"

Carter sighed. "Maybe. If it does, I'm a genius. If it doesn't, I'm fired for malpractice. Either way I'm out of here." Henry found a sudden and great admiration for the man. "Now, is there anything else I can do for you?"

"You can declare me medically unable to deploy. Or better yet, discharged."

Carter shook his head sadly. "Sorry, I can't. My degree is in psychology."

"Well that's good because I think I'm crazy."

"Why do you say that?"

Henry considered Carter's ploy, he fell back on the stretcher and looked up at the ceiling light. "Because everything you just said made perfect sense."

*

Henry gathered his M&M cocktail from the pharmacy and waited with Ski. Doctor Carter escorted Prince out, handed him off to Henry and Ski. He gave Henry a wink and turned back down the hallway. Prince clutched his new medication like a talisman. They piled back into Henry's car, the woman sneaking into the back seat with Prince, and took off, turning down the road to Bravo Company, they watched as a crew installed the new "Henry Drive" sign on top of the stop sign.

Chapter Two

Days until Bravo Company deployment: 90

Doctor Carter gave Henry form DD1734, Certification of Continued Existence in a Living Body, and a day's bed rest to recover from being dead for two days. Chancing the dreams of an unknown enemy lazily trying to kill him for reasons neither of them understood, Henry slept. His subconscious threw him a bone though and he dreamt he was back in North Dakota before his enlistment, unemployed, facing eviction, half-drunk and half-heartedly suicidal, a quarter of a patchy beard on his face. Ski's alarm at 0540 hit him like a slap.

Henry preferred his nightmares; they didn't fill his head of delightful fantasy.

Ski and Henry sighed their way out of their beds, knocking their knees together. Ski, dressed in his gray PT shirt and black shorts, dragged a dry razor across his face in the bathroom, wincing at the burns like he was lowering himself into a warm bath. Henry's razor and the rest of his personal belongings were still locked in storage. He only had his issued equipment from his tough box. He only had his ACUs and boots. Wordlessly, they walked across the parking lot to Bravo Company, caught a flash of the woman who was following Henry behind a tree, and reported to 0630 formation at 0600, making them ten minutes late.

The rule was ten minutes prior. Major Barrymore's standing orders to First Sergeant was to have the Company at PT formation sharply at 0630. First Sergeant dutifully ordered his Detachment Sergeants First Class to report no later than 0620. The Detachment Sergeants rightly told the Staff Sergeants to be ready at 0610, who let the Sergeants know anything later than 0600 would not be tolerated. The Sergeants then told the Corporals, Specialists, and Privates of the dire consequences for reporting after 0550.

Sergeant Prince, though, was on a no-contact-with-direct-sunlight medical profile and Staff Sergeant Highsmith was back in his narcotic fugue state, so Henry and Ski's malfeasance went unnoticed by all but Clay, who was standing by the picnic table, impatiently waiting for the rest of the Product Operations Detachment.

"You're late," he said.

"Shut up, Clay," Ski said.

"Corporal," Clay corrected.

Clay was twenty-four, like Ski, thin like Henry, and a college graduate like both of them. He was devoutly religious like neither of them, and spoke in a voice a half-octave too high for either of them to respect. Clay was dependable, patriotic, motivated, enthusiastic, and no one had ever known him to tell a lie. No one could stand him.

"And you're out of uniform," Clay told Henry.

"This is a uniform," Henry said.

"Not the right one."

Henry looked down at his blouse. "This one has my name on it. Whose uniform should I be wearing?"

Clay's eyes bulged out of his balding head. His hands were clenched into shaking fists.

"Yours but—"

"Then shut up, Clay."

"Corporal," Clay said, squeaked really. "When Prince isn't here, I'm in charge."

“Sergeant,” Ski said.

Clay composed himself with a few shaky breaths. “When Sergeant Prince isn’t here, I’m in charge.”

“Thank god for that,” Henry said and placed a hand on Clay’s shoulder. “And thank god for you. I missed you.” Clay mouthed objections like a fish out of water.

“Henry?” Drake asked as he sauntered past the Tactical Teams to the picnic table. “But you’re dead.”

“Drake, Kim, you’re late,” Clay said, brushing off Henry’s hand with the same revulsion as he did cicada that had landed on his scalp.

“Shut up, Clay,” Drake said. Clay opened his mouth but stopped as Drake took a step towards him. Clay was scared of many things, and Private First Class Drake and his scowl most of all. Drake had a great scowl, second best in the Company, it furrowed his handsome face with an almost certain threat of violence. He leveled it at Clay and, when that was done, at Henry.

Drake didn’t like Henry because he thought Henry was a New York Jew. Henry didn’t like Drake because he knew Drake was an Oklahoma cowboy who could ride a horse and looked at home in a uniform. They drank together every weekend.

“I thought we were going to have to sit Shiva all week.” Drake spent long hours of research in order to better articulate his bigotry.

“That’s only immediate family, Drake. Immediate Jewish families,” Henry said.

“Hey, don’t force your religion on me.”

Henry shook his head. He didn't mind Drake's prejudice. He always thought being born a gentile was an oversight by god, and further proof there wasn't one. Henry produced his DD1734. "Declared alive by Doctor Carter himself," he said.

Drake planted hands on hips and leaned towards the paper, tongue poking his cheek. He checked the form and looked at Henry. "He's very good," Drake said, eyes darting around as he searched for an argument. "Doesn't explain why the road is named after you," he said, crossing his arms and looking satisfied that he'd caught Henry in a lie. Drake looked back at Kim who nodded eagerly. Kim was Korean, spoke no English, and was Drake's constant companion. Drake was racist against Koreans, but thought Kim was Chinese.

Henry had done his best to forget about the road, which meant that he had thought about nothing else since first seeing it. He was being haunted by himself. Henry didn't want to be haunted. He didn't want to be dead, a point that he was admittedly unsold on for a number of years. But counting explosions in a bunker in a land that civilization had left made him certain for the first time that he not only wanted to live, but to live desperately.

He had been miserable ever since.

Henry was saved a response by the arrival of Highsmith, who shuffled out of a minivan. A hush fell over the Product Operations Detachment members as their leader arrived, hushes tended to follow Highsmith, even when he was half-conscious. The Staff Sergeant scanned his charges with his thousand-yard glaze. Years of airborne jumps and deployments left Highsmith a creaking box. The pain medication Highsmith consumed could fell a former child actor.

"Henry," he said, with great effort dredging up words from a pool opioid indifference. "Why aren't you in uniform?"

“My gear’s in storage Sergeant.”

Highsmith grunted. “Where? Barracks?” Henry nodded. Highsmith grimaced. “Shouldn’t have done that,” he said. “Go check on it after PT. Did you report to Major Barrymore?” Henry shook his head. “Go do that too,” he said as the Company formed into ranks.

It was a subconscious resignation, that when more than three soldiers formed ranks the rest followed. Clay was always the first, marking his spot mid-way through the fourth row, sunken chest puffed out to its fullest extent. Henry, Ski, Drake, and Kim meandered to his left, Highsmith a spot removed on the right. They waited at parade rest, staring at the loading dock of the Company, at the back entrance where First Sergeant surely waited, the silence broken by various coughs, sneezes. It sounded like the waiting from for a free clinic. Bravo Company peeked at the sliver of a window that was the only entrance from the docks, caught glimpses of First Sergeant peeking back and frowning.

An adventurous cicada landed on the trunk of Ski’s thigh and made way for the cave of his PT shorts. The whole line watched out the periphery. When the head of the bug disappeared, Ski broke and tore at his shorts with both hands. First Sergeant burst through the door.

“Paderewski. Why are you breaking my formation? Front-leaning rest position. Move,” he said with satisfaction.

“Negative, First Sergeant. Profile.”

The joy drained from First Sergeant’s face, resting back to disappointment. “Flutter kicks?”

“Sorry, First Sergeant,” Ski said, presenting his folded exemption profile. He really was. Ski loved disappointing First Sergeant and hated exercise.

“Side-straddle hop?”

Ski shook his head. First Sergeant stomped down to Ski and looked over the profile, peering up at Ski every few seconds. He handed it back and his face took on a lost look, like he couldn't remember something crucial, but then spied Henry.

“Henry,” he said, positioning himself inches from Henry's face. “Are you alive yet?” Henry nodded.

“He had his gear in barracks storage, Top,” Highsmith said.

First Sergeant's face fell again; he always had that lost look when he wasn't punishing someone. “Write up an incident report.” First Sergeant assumed the head of formation again.

“Well,” sighed First Sergeant “let's see 'em.” Bravo lined up with papers in hand. Clay took his self-assigned role and inspected each profile, marking them off on a clipboard. By the time all 22 bodies were inspected, Reverie played. They went to attention. They saluted the speaker.

The morning Narrative played. “Good morning, guardians of freedom! We all know the stress that Fort Roth's increased operations tempo places on our soldiers and their families. The break-neck pace often leaves little time for the delicate matters of the heart. Hearing the news of a terminated relationship can have an adverse effect on both the warrior overseas as well as the letter writer. But the good men and women of 8th Alpha P-O-E-P have created a solution! Introducing the DD/FRG form 319: Notification of End of Romantic Entanglement. This simple

form takes the guess work out of heartbreak and allows the soldier to have a quick and notarized end to a marriage, engagement, or other qualifying tie so they can go forward in their righteous mission. Contact your Company's Family Readiness Group representative for a copy today! Participation is mandatory."

They went back to rest and waited for the morning announcements from First Sergeant.

"We lost a soldier over the weekend, self-terminated his contract." A controlled, almost imperceptible groan passed through the formation, even Henry, who knew it was coming. It ended in a grunt as First Sergeant said "Class A uniform inspection is scheduled for Wednesday." Henry wondered briefly if this was an acceptable emotional response, but the truth remained that most death in the Army meant little more than uniform inspections. "Second inspection Thursday. Memorial is Friday. Third uniform inspection next Monday." First Sergeant cleared his throat at the grumbling. The Company quieted. "Battalion came down with a request for an Ops Demo. We need to send a team next month. Major Barrymore is requesting volunteers."

Henry clenched his hands together behind his back. The last time he volunteered for anything was for the Army, and they sent him to war. He wasn't going to repeat that mistake. His was not the only hand firmly at his side. Bravo was uniform, and would not volunteer unless ordered. Except for Clay. His arm was a perfect 90 degree angle, his fingers held perfectly together.

"No one? We'll try again tomorrow," Clay's hand went down sharply, but Henry could see involuntary movement on his face. "Company PT day. Clay, what can we do?"

Clay consulted his notes, drew breath a few times before shaking his head blowing it out again. Inspiration struck him and his head flew up, only to dissolve into mutterings and squinting at the sheet.

“Figure it out,” First Sergeant said, taking off again to the woods behind the company area. Clay was still concocting plans, scratching his head, as the rest of Bravo slipped out of formation, to their cars or barracks rooms for a nap.

*

The Elliot P Lopez POEP Barracks facility was a complex of three buildings in a loose “U” shape around the volleyball court, and black mold that grew in every shape around everything. It prospered more than any living thing on post. The housing buildings were three and four stories tall and soldiers were bounced back and forth between them every few months as work crews in chemical suits fought back against the fungus. In the middle was the single-story office building, where Henry went to claim his possessions.

Flags from all the charter members of the United Nations were hanged from the ceiling, the tips occasionally tickling Henry’s neck as we signed in at the front desk. He was directed to sign by a Private Stone who was watching a movie on Henry’s computer. Henry knew it was his because he had written his name on it in permanent marker so as prevent theft.

“Where’d you get that computer?” Henry asked

Stone hooked a thumb behind him. “What’cha here for?” Stone asked.

“Storage claim,” Henry said. Stone whistled and shook his head.

“Shouldn’t’ve done that,” Stone said. “Name?” Henry told him, looking pointedly at his computer. Stone grabbed a clipboard, leaned back in his chair and ran a finger down the paper. “Here it is. Deceased. You family?” Henry said no, presented his ID. Stone looked sideways at it, at Henry. Henry presented his DD1734.

Stone paused the movie with an exasperated sigh and grabbed a key ring, motioned for Henry to follow his slumped form to the bowels of the building.

“Wasn’t much left before we saw that you were dead,” Stone said, leading Henry to a back room with unpainted walls that was sectioned into chain link cages. Henry heard rustling from a cage to his left and saw a hunched soldier inspecting a collection of DVDs. “Here it is,” Stone said, unlocking the mainly empty cage. “Sign here.” Henry did. Stone hefted a shoulder-mounted loudspeaker out of the cage and handed it to Henry.

“This isn’t mine,” Henry said.

“It was in your cage.”

“I don’t want it.”

“You signed for it. Can’t have you leave it here. That’s irresponsible.”

Henry knew when he was beat. Barracks detail was given to those who were deemed not worthy enough to be in Bravo Company, a collection of misfits awaiting Dishonorable Discharges. They didn’t fear the Uniform Code of Military Justice and would welcome a fight. Henry envied them. He took the speaker. “Can I get my computer back?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

*

The volleyball courts behind the office was where Henry went to be alone and despondent. Volleyball courts dotted Fort Roth and every other military installation he had seen, a cheap and easy effort to boost morale. And where ever they were, soldiers weren't. The nets hung taut and unused, the sand untouched by all but the weather and Henry's boot prints. After depositing the speaker in his room, disturbing a delighted Ski from a nap, Henry settled on the logs used to corral the sand and debated the merits of despair.

Anger was right out. Henry tried anger for most of his 25 years and found it exhausting. But the events of the past day, the six months before that, and the two years before that stirred an irritating need in Henry for an emotional response. The choice, it seemed, was up to him, and if he was good at making choices, he admitted, he wouldn't be in the Army in the first place.

Offended worked, he thought. He wasn't dead and didn't want to be dead, and the assertion that he was *offended* him. Going on another trip down range was deeply *offensive*. I have my whole life ahead of me, he thought, covering the toes of his boots in sand. When covered, he watched the little dunes quake with the movement of his feet. A whole life, he thought.

He imagined meeting a woman he would come to love, and then the woman that he would settle for and who would settle for him. Maybe they would smooch their DNA together when things got boring and their dreams seemed worth giving up or passing down the line. He'd work at a job that he could just barely tolerate, she'd do something worthwhile that would slowly eat away at her soul. A school teacher, or social worker, he imagined. They'd both feel nettled by a disappointment that would persist like a corn kernel lodged between teeth and gums and force it on their children in well-meaning but cruel ways.

A divorce. A kid that wrote bad poetry and smoked clove cigarettes, maybe with a brief stint with substance abuse, but the screw-up wouldn't even commit to that. Child support payments. The indignation of signing a lease for a one-bedroom apartment at 48 years old. Maybe, just maybe, one of those kids would plop out one of their own who would see in Henry something good, or maybe just thought he was kind of funny. The Army would be just something he did when he was young, a story to tell, an adventure to relive when he realized he had had no others. He'd be a good source for a high school report on the wars of the early 21st century.

It sounded good.

He just needed it to happen. He had to get out in front of his death before it became boring. The Army had two speeds, frantic and boring, and he knew frantic would evaporate quickly.

Henry stood, and took off at a trot to the Company with the rest of the soldiers, ready to do whatever it would take to weasel out his military duty and, with any luck, out of the Army itself.

Chapter Three

Days until Bravo Company Deployment: 90

“Clay, I need to see the Commander,” Henry said.

“Corporal,” Clay said.

“No, the Commander,” Henry said.

Clay’s eyes bulged, flabbergasted. He was prone to be flabbergast. He jabbed a finger at the rank on his chest. “I’m a Corporal,” he said.

“Exactly, that’s why I need to see the Commander.”

“I’m not in yet,” Barrymore yelled from inside his office.

“He’s not in yet,” Clay said.

Henry left the command suite, followed by Clay. The suite was on the second floor of the Bravo Company building. Clay and Henry walked down the hall to the Product Operation Detachment. The POD was the multimedia and operational hub of Bravo Company. It was where the real propaganda work of Bravo Company didn’t get done. He entered the office, felt like he’d never left it.

The POD’s desks, twelve in all, were pushed against the wall. Ski and Drake were booting up computers that were old enough to enlist, and Henry could hear the coffee machine on the table in the middle of the room, old enough to retire, churning. The exception to the technological antiquity was the expensive editing suite that costs POEP command the equivalent of Henry’s yearly salary, and which all POEP soldiers were forbidden to use. Kim sat at the controls, unable to be ordered away. Kim and Drake were the Company’s graphic designers who

knew little about graphic design. Henry, Ski, and Clay were the propagandists who knew nothing about propaganda.

Henry booted up his own computer but couldn't sit still. He paced around the office. The walls were covered with maps of Iraq and Afghanistan, and a pair of window blinds. In his pacing, Henry returned to the blinds in order to pry them open with two fingers. There were no windows in the POD, which caused Henry's claustrophobia to flare up. He could see Drake visibly tense with each pass.

"What the hell are you looking at?" he asked.

"The sign," Henry said, looking at the concrete walls behind the window blinds. The blinds served the purpose of POEP doctrine. Due to the sensitive nature of POD work, the room had to be blocked from outside view. Doctrine mandated that window blinds be drawn at all times. First Sergeant had the blinds installed on the concrete walls so that doctrine could be followed.

"What sign?" Clay said.

"Shut up, Clay," Henry said. "The one that says I'm dead."

"You just had to bring that up," Drake said, rising from his chair, always sensitive to someone receiving more honor than him. He kept track of honor, Henry knew. Based on Drake's annoyance with Henry, which was greater than the usual disdain, meant that Drake had surmised that Henry's deployment and posthumous recognition put him above Drake's Physical Training scores and willingness to kill without question.

“And he doesn’t even want it,” Ski said, stuffing a delighted fist in his mouth at the squabbling of his two best friends.

“Do you not even want to be honored for dying for your country?” Drake asked.

“I’d prefer to avoid it,” Henry said.

“Honor?”

“Dying for my country,” Henry said.

“Communist,” Clay said.

“Shut up, Clay,” Drake said. “You are a communist, Henry.”

“We’re not fighting the Communists anymore.”

“Just what the Communists want you to think,” Drake looked pleased. “Why are you too good to die for your country?”

“I just don’t see how that benefits the country. Or me.”

“It’s not the dying,” Drake said slowly, like he was explaining to a child. “It’s the willingness. Weren’t you willing to die when you were deployed?”

“No,” Henry said.

“You can’t win a war with that attitude.”

“I’m not trying to win a war.”

“Can’t win it with that attitude either,” Clay said, pale face turning red.

“So you’re willing to die when we go downrange?”

“Hell no,” Drake said. “I’m more willing to kill than die. But if I do die, you won’t hear me bitching about it. I certainly wouldn’t complain about a road being named after me.”

“I’m not dead,” Henry said.

“I don’t see what that has to do with anything,” Drake said.

Highsmith entered the POD, stopping all conversation. He mumbled that Battalion had sent a POEP message down for approval before retiring to his office at the back of the POD, leaving a crack in the doors. The soldiers looked at once to Clay, who did his best to pretend no one was looking at him.

After a moment, Highsmith was asleep and talking. When on base Highsmith’s veins ran blood and opioids in equal measure, causing instant sleep when he was seated for more than twenty seconds. Years of mission briefs leaked out of Highsmith’s mouth every time he was asleep. No one in the POD trusted dependable and virtuous Clay with the information.

“This is a Secret security brief,” Highsmith droned. Clay threw his hands up and left.

The rest of the POD went to work, the computers finally roused. The POD’s work consisted of having the Propaganda Specialists analyzing Propaganda messages for effectiveness and clarity. The messages were crafted by design specialists at 3rd Battalion who had no Propaganda Specialists of their own, making the analysis process vital. The POD would make suggestions that would be denied before distribution. The process had been streamlined over the years so that the suggestions were denied before they were made.

Henry collapsed in the chair, grabbed the back of his head with his hands. It wasn't fair. Nothing was fair, Henry reminded himself to fuel his offense. Henry had done everything right,

squeaked through training showing no great ability or leadership, served without distinction in a war that was lost years before he got there. His dress uniform was set to be garishly decorated for all he hadn't accomplished.

He was so offended about the road sign he didn't realize for ten minutes of good work that his computer monitor was missing. By the time he realized this, Kim was printing out a stack of papers. Drake doled out the stacks to Henry and Ski. The messages were to be widely distributed around all Company areas. The POD members looked at the door that led to the rest of the Company area and shuffled their feet. The POD was stuffy, cramped, too hot in the winter and too cold in the summer, but it while nothing happened in the POD, only bad things happened out of it. Highsmith removed the indecision by starting a Top Secret brief, causing a great deal of sighs and grumbles as the room was vacated.

Drake headed downstairs to the tactical teams without a word. Kim looked at Henry and Ski, and followed Drake. Ski, who hated going downstairs because the First Sergeant was always there, motioned with his head to follow the rest. Henry shook his head and went back to the command suite, taping a paper from his stack every ten feet.

The command suite had a two offices and a small waiting room that consisted of two plastic chairs. Clay was loitering around the suite. Clay was always loitering around the halls when he wasn't at the beck and call of Major Barrymore. It wasn't his position, the Major didn't ask for it and Clay took no great pleasure in it. It was a self-appointed position because Clay wasn't allowed in the POD anymore.

“Commander in yet?” Henry asked.

“No,” Barrymore said. Clay shook his head.

Henry taped another sign to the Commander's door and sat in the unoccupied chair across from it. With nothing left to do but hear Barrymore curse about technology, he read it. It said:

“Somewhere a true believer is training to kill you. He is training with minimum food and water, in austere conditions, day and night. The only thing clean on him is his weapon. He doesn't worry about what workout to do — his rucksack weighs what it weighs, and he runs until the enemy stops chasing him. The true believer doesn't care how hard it is; he knows that he either wins or dies. He doesn't go home at 1700; he is home. He only knows the cause. Now. Do you really want to quit?”

Henry had to admit that as a piece of propaganda it was uniquely effective. It made Henry feel horrible that he really wanted to quit but had no way to do it.

“He seems to want it more,” a voice said from beside him.

Henry hadn't noticed that the woman that had been following him was seated beside him. He saw that she was smaller and thinner than he was, her uniform hanged off her like she was a hanger. He read “Koontz” on the bunched fabric on the right side of her chest. She was leafing through a stack of orders and official documents with most of the words blacked out.

“So you're not hiding from me anymore,” Henry said.

“I never was,” Koontz said to her papers, “not officially. I'm under orders to follow Specialists Henry, and officially you were dead when I may-or-may-not have been hiding from you. A CID agent can't very well follow a dead man. Imagine the embarrassment.”

“So you're CID,” Henry said, wondering why the Criminal Investigation Division was following him.

“Yes, but not officially.”

“And you’re following me.”

“I’m under orders to follow you, yes” Koontz said.

“You’re awfully truthful for CID,” Henry said.

Koontz sighed. “CID is attempting to soften their image. In order to foster trust, we’re no longer supposed to spread obvious falsehoods.”

“So you can’t lie,” Henry said.

“Not officially.”

“Is your name really Koontz?”

“Not officially.”

“Isn’t that a lie?” Henry asked. He noticed that Clay, five feet away and leaning on the Commander’s door, made a concerted effort to not look at Koontz.

She looked up from her papers with a disgusted grunt. “I can’t lie officially, but if the course of my official duties forces me to, I am encouraged to do so.”

“How do you justify that?”

“By following orders.”

“I meant morally.”

She snorted, then looked at Henry and saw that he was serious. Her face scrunched into thought. “If I tell a lie and you know it’s a lie, is it dishonest?”

“I don’t know.”

“I do,” Koontz said, returning to her papers. She found the form she was looking for and presented it to Henry. “Is this you?”

The form was a mess of abbreviations, form numbers, and regulation citations. Henry found his name floating like an island. He struggled with the rest of the language but was able to puzzle out that he was being investigated for a possible mental health disorder, he felt an involuntary sensation of cold water running through him. He nodded at Koontz and returned the paper. “Is this why you’re here?”

She nodded, stopped, and cocked her head to the side. “Part one of three. Can I see your 1734?” He handed it over, she scanned the form then squinted at Henry before handing it back. “Well, that’s going to make this a lot harder,” she said, waving the mental health waver at Henry. “Why’d you file this against yourself anyway?”

“A few years ago I panicked and thought I was a soldier. I started dressing like one, and people started treating me like one. About six months ago it reached a head when I knew I was willingly headed towards a war zone I had no business in. I thought I’d get it checked out. Can that get me out of going back to war?” He asked with a flood of hope. Clay’s eyes bulged. Henry waited for chastisement that didn’t come.

“What war? We’re not at war. Not officially,” Koontz said. “But no. That complaint is only good for the last deployment. You can file another one, and we’ll get back to you in six to eight months.” She pulled out a word pad and jotted down some notes, scratched out some others. “You wouldn’t know where I could find Sergeant Howell would you?”

“He’s dead. Played tonsil-target practice from what I hear.”

Koontz said “hmm,” and shuffled through her papers. “Well that’s one down. I have to close the book on your suicide though, unless you have any objections.”

“You were investigating my suicide?”

“It certainly would have helped the insanity plea. As it stands I still have to follow you in order to determine if you filed an erroneous report.”

“I often feel trapped in a hopeless situation, that the walls were closing in on me and the only way out is death,” Henry said helpfully.

“Save it for when I’m officially following you.”

“How long will you be following me? How exactly does this work?”

Koontz finished her filing and loaded her papers in a manila folder. “Oh it’ll be a time,” she said. “I’m good at stretching things out. I’ll kick my feet up here until you guys are in country to avoid another sexual assault case in Division.” Henry’s neck hair spiked at the mention of Fort Roth’s Infantry Division, a lawful land of alpha males and assholes. “I’m better at reading people.” She pointed at Clay. “For example, I’ve order this one to not notice or speak to me because I judge him to be insufferable. Am I wrong?” Henry shook his head. “I’m perhaps best, though, at figuring things out. I’ve figured you out. Your problem at least. For further proof, I’ll ask why were still sitting here when we both want to be in the Commander’s office? The obvious answer is that you can’t figure out that what the Commander really wants is soldiers who are good with computers.”

Major Barrymore’s head burst out of his door, startling Clay and Henry. “You Privates know about computers? Good. Get in here.” He shut the door and said “Come in, Clay you're

dismissed. Now you can see the problem...” Clay opened the door for Henry and Koontz. “I have the four monitors here and it's great. I love it. I have a lot of balls in the air, as you can imagine, and I need all the monitors I can get.” Major Barrymore's office was cramped and ill-lit. His desk stretched from one wall to the other and he had to climb over it to get in his chair, the desk prevented any other furniture; Henry and Koontz had to stand. The walls were decorated with maps of war zones he had only seen through an office window. “But I need more. Now I just got this new one and I can't get it to work.” His speech turned to grunts as he clambered over the desk.

Major Barrymore was too everything. He was too big, too tall, spoke too loud, smiled too broad, shook hands too hard. He looked like an overstuffed scarecrow, meat bulging out of his uniform like hay and his head popping out of his collar like a pumpkin. The only thing he didn't have too much of was hair, which sheepishly dotted the top of his head like stubborn weeds on a boulder. The Major's desk was a mess of wires and screens, and he had to bend over to scoop up some that he knocked over. He regained his breath and slid in his chair, resting his huge right arm on the table so it faced Henry and Koontz. Barrymore wore a deployment on his right sleeve under his flag, showing that he had survived a combat tour and made sure everyone knew it. He frowned at seeing similar patches on both Henry and Koontz.

“Now, let's hear some solutions.”

“Sir, the sign is wrong,” Henry said.

The commander's smile faded a shade. He didn't like the formality that came with being an officer. He wanted his orders followed and the undying obedience of his subordinates but didn't like knowing that his orders were only followed because they were orders.

“The sign's wrong,” Henry corrected.

He was a hundred-watt bulb again. “I know, I'm having the damnedest time getting this monitor to work,” he said, motioning to Henry's monitor.

“I have my 1734 and I'd like the sign changed,” Henry continued. Koontz sighed.

“Yeah, uh-huh,” Barrymore said. “It won't even come on.”

“Have you tried turning it off and on again?” Koontz said.

“It's already off,” Barrymore said and wiped a hand across his sweating brow.

“Mm-hmm, great. Now you just have to turn it on.”

“But I can't. It won't turn on.”

“Well you just need to turn it off first.”

“I can't turn it off,” Barrymore protested.

“Ah, see that's your problem. You have to turn it off before you can turn it off-and-on again.”

Barrymore pursed his lips and nodded. “Can you turn it off for me?”

Koontz shook her head sadly. “We're only authorized to turn things on.”

Barrymore put his hands on his hips. “Clay,” he yelled and Clay peeked in the door and asked “Sir?” Barrymore shook his head. Clay closed the door, opened it and said “yes?” instead.

“Can you turn this monitor off?”

“It's already off,” Clay said.

“I know that, but I need you to turn it off.” Clay floundered, unable to complete and unwilling to disobey an order. “Forget it, Clay. Dismissed. And find me someone who can turn my monitor off.” His chair squeaked in protest as Barrymore descended on it. He stared at his window blinds, lost in thought. “Have you seen my set up down range? You will.” He shot a glance at Henry and Koontz, then back at the blinds. “Beautiful. Eight monitors. Eight. I can’t even use all of them. Took me almost all deployment to find that many.” He took a wistful breath and let the hair shoot out of his nostrils like a siren. He turned back to Henry and Koontz, surprised that there were people in his office.

“Oh. How can I help you Privates?”

Koontz motioned for Henry to go ahead.

“The sign’s wrong,” Henry said.

“How’s it wrong?”

“It should say Howell Drive.”

“And what does it say now? And which sign are you talking about?”

“Henry Drive.”

“Isn’t it great? We finally have a name. Battalion even gave him a promotion.” He bent forward conspiratorially, spoke in a whisper that could be heard in a stadium. “And I got his monitor.”

“That’s my monitor,” Henry said.

“And who are you?”

“Specialist Henry.”

“Like the sign!” Barrymore said, then his face fell as Henry presented his 1734. Koontz tsked. Barrymore’s hands shook as he took the form. “Are you going to take your monitor back? I just figured out how to get it working,” Barrymore asked in a quivering voice. Henry sighed and shook his head. Barrymore clapped his hands in exuberance, the detonation ringing deep in Henry’s ears. Barrymore whispered again. “You can just take Howell’s. Apparently he won’t be needing it.”

He rubbed his hands together, satisfied that he had resolved the issue, and turned to Koontz. “We’re here to report, sir,” she said with a sharp salute. Barrymore blanched and turned around to avoid the salute. Major Barrymore hated returning salutes, it was why he never went outside, all those soldiers forcing him to return salutes. They sought him out, he would say, followed them with their insincere salutes and sarcastic “sirs,” so he avoided them whenever possible. He was safe from the salutes while indoors until someone came reporting for duty.

“Force of habit,” Koontz explained to a satisfied smirk. Henry didn’t know Koontz well, but already had decided that he enjoyed seeing her flustered. He motioned for her to drop the salute, and for her to try again.

“We’re here to report,” she tried again. Barrymore spun around. “Specialists Henry and Koontz reporting from 10th battalion HRC, to 11th Battalion Alpha Comp—“

“Bravo Company,” Henry said.

“Oh,” she said “I’m supposed to be in Alpha.”

“This is Alpha,” Henry said.

“But you just said Bravo.”

“It's also Bravo,” Henry said unhelpfully. Major Barrymore didn't like the pressure that being an Alpha company brought and First Sergeant Hurst didn't think his men were worthy of the prestige of being called Alpha. There was none of either, but it was Bravo Company for as long as Henry had known it.

Koontz let out a long breath, stared at Henry. She turned back to Major Barrymore and started over. “Si...” She let out another breath. “Specialists Koontz and Henry reporting from 10th Battalion, HRC to 11th Battalion, *Bravo* Company as,” she looked at Henry.

“Requested,” he finished.

“Happy to have you both with us,” Barrymore said. He engulfed their hands in his then looked over their orders. “Looks like you're both in the POD. That's good, we're down a man already. Clay!” he yelled, Henry's ears popped. Clay entered. “Dismissed. Show these two the POD. Oh, and Henry? Can you go tell Chaplain Swift about the change in the memorial? He's been preparing for Henry and apparently it's someone else.”

“Howell,” Henry said.

“Who?”

“Howell died, I'm Henry.”

“Like the sign.”

“Yes sir,” Henry said, and used the silence to squeeze out of the door behind Koontz and Clay.

Clay followed his orders, showed Henry and Koontz the POD. They found the rest of the Detachment loitering around the hall, which meant Highsmith had started another Top Secret brief and no one had the clearance to listen. Henry asked if anyone wanted to go to the PX. Ski jumped at the opportunity. Koontz declined, followed Henry and Ski to the parking lot. In her grumblings, though, Henry remembered what she said earlier.

“What did you mean when you said you figured out my problem?” Henry asked.

Koontz looked up. “What? Oh. It’s that you’re an idiot.”

Henry considered that. “Maybe,” he said, waiting for Ski to unlock his car. Ski’s car had no power locks, windows, steering.

Koontz lowered her eyes at him. “It’s no fun if you just roll over for it.” She watched Ski fumble about to unlock Henry’s door and try to squeeze through the seats to get Koontz’s. “You are an idiot though.” Henry looked a question at her, fatigued by the exchange with Barrymore. “You were dead,” Koontz continued. “Dead men can’t deploy. If you’d have keep that 1734 in your pocket you could have been out of here today.”

“Wouldn’t you track me down?”

Koontz looked offended. “Have I given you the impression that I care? You’re reasonable intelligent for an idiot, why can’t you figure out how to work the system? Why does the truth matter?”

Henry thought: *Because I've been in the Army for almost four years, and nothing that they've said about me has been right. Every word on every accommodation, job description, service record, PT test, or background check has been at the very least an exaggeration. I'm not*

selfless, patriotic, or courageous, and I take great pride in not being those things. I went overseas and they said some crazy things about what I didn't do. The worst would have been if I had died. They would have said I died for my country, and the truth which would have been the holes some guy put in me. But what I am is alive, and if they're going to do one thing right by me it should be that.

Henry was an idiot, he conceded. He climbed in Ski's car, let the force of the two other doors closing rock him around.

"What's the third thing?" he asked.

Koontz was looking proud of herself in the backseat. "The third thing of what?"

"There was a first and second thing?" Ski asked.

"You said you were here for three things. Me and Howell. What was the third?"

"It's a PReCaUTION," Koontz said.

"From what?"

"That's an acronym. Preemptive Reporting of Casualties in Unfit Troops In Overseas Nations."

"That's a quality acronym."

"Thanks," Koontz said with pride. "I was commended for it."

"What's that mean?"

“It means I’ve seen some hosed-up Companies in my time, but this one is a piece of work. People will die, Henry,” she said as Ski got the engine cranked and turned on his wipers to combat the bugs.

Chapter 4

Days until Bravo Company deployment: 89

“No smiling,” First Sergeant repeated as Henry looked into the camera. Henry didn’t need to be told, First Sergeant just liked to give the reminder. Kim pressed the shutter and Henry heard an electronic beep. Kim turned the camera to Henry so he could see his grim face sticking out of his green dress uniform and under a maroon beret, the stars and stripes serving as a backdrop. First Sergeant snapped his fingers and Kim took another.

“For the plaque,” First Sergeant said.

“But First Sergeant, I’m not dead.”

“Don’t rub it in. Your paperwork is still processing and until that time, Battalion will operate under what they have on record.”

The second photo was more the same as the first one, the same as the one he had taken eight months before, only slightly different than the dozens that were printed in the Army Times under the banner “the human cost.”

It was his death photo. Henry unbuttoned his coat and collared shirt, put them on their respective hangars, and zipped up his ACU blouse.

“Beret,” First Sergeant snapped. It bothered him to no end that headgear was allowed to be worn indoors for just this purpose. He was in evident pain when he saw a beret indoors and couldn’t punish those who broke the rules. First Sergeant’s nose was twitching as he took another look at Henry’s uniform.

“There’s something,” he said under his breath before snapping his head to the next soldier in line.

The top right corner of the flag sagged. Henry helped re-tape the plastic flag that had come unstuck from the wall of the command suite. He gathered his uniform and walked past the line of Bravo soldiers waiting their turn to look solemn and resolute. They were lined up all the way to the POD, and Henry had to excuse himself in front of a Sergeant to return to work.

He saw the rest of the POD members staring in incomprehension at Koontz.

That morning, Koontz was seated cross-legged in the hall and greeted Henry with an exasperated sigh when he opened his door. He had expected her to be there and was surprised only in that he was surprised by her presence. She extended her hand and snapped her fingers until he helped her up. She followed at a discreet distance to formation, saddled up between him and Ski at formation, and didn’t raise her hand when First Sergeant asked for volunteers for Ops Demo.

Bravo Company pretended not to notice her. It had nothing to do with her job, her position was a secret from every one she hadn’t told, but had everything with her being a her. By and large, Bravo was as sexist as any Company in the military, which was moderate to severe. Bravo’s distinction was that, as a tactical unit, women were largely excluded. They were only allowed in the POD and support capabilities. The men of the company whispered and made clandestine gestures that Koontz saw and ignored.

In front of the POD though, she was gawked at openly. Clay was still under orders to ignore her. His ignorance was obvious. Ski was only looking because it made him uncomfortable. Prince, there only to appear hopelessly ill during the uniform inspection, was

slightly amazed and checked his new prescription to see if hallucinations were still a side-effect, darting his eyes from bottle to woman. Drake was the real grunting and shuffling problem though. He didn't much care for women in uniform. As far as Henry could tell, Drake didn't much care for women out of uniform either.

"Is this what you do in here?" Koontz asked Henry, gesturing towards the rest of the POD. They pretended as one to be doing something else for a moment before returning to wide-eyed staring.

"Not usually. This is where we solve the world's problems."

"Should I introduce myself? They're staring."

"We do that. Not a lot of us see a woman often. Not even Clay, and he's married."

"She's busy," Clay said to the wall.

"That's too bad." Henry took his seat and sent out a longing sigh in his head for Clay's wife.

Clay's wife was a constant source of conversation any time he was out of the room. The POD had met her once at the Company Christmas party, but were all instantly smitten. Like all off-duty functions in the Army, the Christmas party was rigidly-planned fun. The itinerary was focus-group tested, debated, and strictly budgeted. The uniform was civilian attire. Attendance was mandatory. The beer, though, was free and plentiful. Henry, Ski, and Drake had heard tell of Clay's wife, the whirlwind romance that went from introduction to nuptials in less than a season of football. They were three beers deep and just about convinced Clay had invented her when she graced Bravo Company.

She was a marvel. Her overt sexuality only heightened by her husband's lack. She wore a modest black dress that was perhaps a size smaller than her frame. She wasn't slim, but plump in an alluring, fertility goddess way. Her two-inch heels clicked on the cement floor, mascara lining almond eyes, and a half-smirk smothered in deep red lipstick. A full three inches taller than Clay without the heels, she towered over her husband as he followed her from group to group, laughing easy and often. Clay wasn't beaming proudly, but tried his best to hold himself erect and stern at the sideways glances.

Natalie, she said her name was, her name tickled Henry's ears. Henry had no reference before for the word sultry until he met her. She was a shameless flirt and Henry had dated enough of her kind to be repulsed by how attracted he was to her.

Highsmith, four beers and three Percocet deep, shook her hand and told Henry, Ski, and Drake afterward that she was the type that didn't last a deployment. At least one soldier in a Company came back from war to a house empty of all but a divorce statement signed with his power of attorney, an eviction notice, and a host of best-not-thought-of stains. Henry, Ski, and Drake nodded and looked at each other and their shoes, each one wishing, if it was inevitable anyway, that one of the stains would come from them.

Out of what passed as respect, or maybe a sliver of sympathy of the sullen and miserable Clay, they decided to pretend she really was busy and that the Clay household would stand for ages and Clay's minivan would be filled with all the Clay children he bought it for.

With the sound of rushing air out of a leather cushion, Koontz crashed into the chair next to Henry. He could only see the back of the chair from his desk, her dress coat hanging from the back. Because collaboration was an important part of the POEP job, the partitions between desks

were large and imposing. There was a moment of relative silence only broken by the batteries-in-a-blender sound of the computers booting up.

“Can someone look at this?” Prince said. “I think we have work to review.”

“You’re the Sergeant. Only you get the Narratives,” Drake said, still huffing.

The Narrative was core of POEP business. Propaganda being a dirty word in the military, POEP units never used propaganda, lies and emotional manipulation shouted through loudspeakers, posters, and radio/television ads. Instead they furthered the Narrative message of the Army through multimedia outlets.

“Yeah,” Prince said. “But Doctor Carter says I should doubt all of my senses while on this medication. I’ll forward it. Does everyone see it?”

“I’m still logging on,” Clay said.

“Mine froze up,” Ski said.

“This desk doesn’t have a monitor,” Koontz said.

Henry watched the white dots on his computer, the ones that showed it was loading, change from a steady pulsing circle to a series of herky-jerky flashes before the screen went dark.

“What’s it say?” Henry asked.

“I can’t be trusted to say. I’m sorry,” Prince said. He was fading fast, the color and energy given by the full pot of coffee was tapering out and his grayish pallor returned. Henry made a bold move by standing and walking to Prince’s computer.

“It’s the memorial video for Howell,” he said.

“You can’t look at that,” Clay said. “Only Sergeants can.”

“Shut up Clay,” Koontz said, to the approval of the rest of the POD. She joined Henry in hunching behind Prince’s chair. Ski and Drake crowded around, Drake keeping a distinct separation from Koontz.

On Prince’s screen was a video attachment labeled “POEP memorial video format standard: SGT Henry, Eugene.”

“Henry?” Drake asked.

“Sergeant?” Clay squeaked.

“They’re fixing it,” Henry said.

“Eugene?” Ski asked.

Prince, with assurances from his subordinates, loaded the video. After an initial stutter which caused them all to hold their breath, it loaded. Kim, finished with the photos, entered and walked over to crowd.

The opening was only the sound of a drumline playing staccato, inspiring beats over a black background. “Third Battalion POEP productions” faded onto screen in a fancy, military font with breaks in the middle of the letters. The drums and logo faded out to a slide show with Henry’s name and dates of birth, death.

“They’re fixing it,” Henry said again.

“*Proud to be an American or American Soldier?*” Clay asked. Kim said something no one could understand. “You’re crazy,” Clay said.

The first whiny notes of *Proud to be an American* came through a crescendo, echoed by groans from all but Clay, who legitimately cared for the cloying country ballad, and Drake who was miming for Kim to pay him for a bet. The song was inescapable for a uniformed soldier, played at every memorial, class graduation, sanctioned military function, and bar around base since it was birthed from a bald eagle into the bed of a pick-up. It was as ubiquitous as the national anthem, sometimes subbed in for it, and while the anthem’s run-on sentences didn’t inspire much patriotism in Henry, at least it had the official designation.

The screen faded in and Henry was looking at himself and his death photo from his first deployment. Except for a few more medals, it was the same one he had just taken. The tribute then took the familiar, chronological path of the deceased’s Army career. The photos were stock images, filler that were to be replaced by the Company. Initial enlistment photo at Basic, an action shot of what might have been Howell tackling an obstacle course with a bunch of other soldiers who also might have been him, a shot of his graduation class. The slideshow moved on to Advanced Individual Training. Finally there was a picture of a soldier getting his jump wings and donning his maroon beret.

From there the photos stopped, replaced by suggestions for photos to be supplied by the Company. The slide after the Company photo of Bravo after its founding read “On the job x3,” followed by “Funny picture.” After that “Family x4” was suggested, then “outing with friends” and finally “thumbs up.” The video ended, as all 3rd Battalion tribute videos did, with a montage of PEOP soldiers doing POEP things, pointing at computer screens, bending over maps. This video was accompanied by the orchestral Army theme. It was also used as a recruitment tool.

“Here I come,” Clay said, and they watched as Clay appeared on the screen, struggling to get another push up in as a muted First Sergeant yelled at him. Clay was quite pleased with himself. It was the only photo in the video that wasn’t staged.

The video ended and the soldiers straightened their backs. Prince, who had slumped in his chair, was jarred from his doze by three sets of hands releasing the back of his chair at once.

“Do we have that many pictures of Henry?” Drake asked.

“Howell,” Henry corrected.

“Him too.”

Henry took a few steps away from the rest, suddenly realizing that there really wasn’t enough pictures of him to fill three minutes of gooey pop-country. As a rule Henry avoided having his picture taken, always feeling self-conscious when an acquaintance tried to take one of him at a bar or party or social gathering. It was increasingly difficult with every goddamn phone having a camera glued on so Henry, as a rule, avoided bars and parties and social gatherings. He hated being posed and seeing a moronic smile under the black brick of a phone as the idiot tried to turn on/off the flash. He hated the non-posed shots more because they somehow felt more disingenuous. It was impossible to ignore that a photo was being taken and “acting natural” seemed more like a pose than smiling and throwing arms around people he didn’t like.

With a certain disgust, Henry realized he would have to endure it just so there would be proof that he was alive at one point in time.

“Who knew him best?” Clay asked.

“Who knew who best?” Ski said.

“Henry,” Drake said.

“Howell,” Henry said.

“No. I’m saying you knew him best.”

“I barely knew he was alive,” Henry said.

“But you knew he was dead,” Koontz said. “That’s better than anyone else here.”

“That’s right,” Drake agreed. “We all thought it was you.” Clay and Ski nodded, Prince’s head fell forward in sleep.

“Why would you think that?” Henry said, slightly hurt by Ski’s unabashed admission. “I know you were told it was me, but no one questioned it?”

Drake scratched his head. “It made sense,” he said.

“Why would I kill myself?”

“Why wouldn’t you? You were deployed and depressed,” Drake said.

“Single,” Clay added.

“Shut up, Clay. Few friends,” Ski said.

“Lackluster career prospects, no strong ties to family” Koontz said. She pulled a folder out of her desk, opened it and read. “You actually marked that ‘few or none’ for ‘days I feel happy or content’ on the mental health self-evaluation. Who tells the truth on those?”

Before anyone could ask why Koontz had that information, Henry said “doesn’t anyone have denial anymore?”

“Every morning when I wake up,” Ski said “I have a moment where I think that I must have had too much to drink the night before and didn’t remember where I passed out because this room can’t be where I live and I know I didn’t enlist in the goddamn Army. It last about six seconds and breaks my spirit each day.” He paused. “I wouldn’t want to start my morning any other way.”

Prince stirred in his sleep, awakened by the silence. “So do we have any pictures of Howell?”

Everyone pulled out their phones and wandered, heads down, back to their desks. Clay waited until he was at his desk before he clandestinely produced his own. Cell phones were strictly prohibited in the Company area, and having one in an area where Secret information was given was punishable by the UCMJ, but Clay wouldn’t risk missing a contact from his wife. Posters designed by Third Battalion were posted on all four walls of the POD. The rule never stuck though. Henry sat at his desk and fished in his pocket for his phone, one of the few objects he took with him on deployment. He knew he didn’t have any pictures of Howell, but the action was infectious. It was gone.

No one looked up as Henry scooted his rolling chair past the partition and into what had become Koontz’s desk.

“No,” she said without looking around.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I don’t have your phone. Officially.”

“I have a passcode on it,” Henry said.

“Yeah, that’s become a problem.” She swiveled around in her chair. She held the phone out to Henry. He reached to grab it and she pulled the phone to her chest like a protective mother. She held it out again, enjoying herself, and Henry tapped in the four digit code. She nodded and swiveled back around as Henry rolled back to his desk.

“You can have it back later to call your parents. I know our wars are cheap facsimiles, but who doesn’t call when they get back? From what they’re texting, they seem pretty upset.”

Henry had called once while down range. After both Narrative Messages had been distributed and numb terror got tiresome, Henry was eager to volunteer for anything to pass the time. He was assigned to the mail room, to sort and equally parcel out the gifts and letters from well-wishers and grade schoolers sent from the States. The letters written in loopy, crayon letters were easy, the candy just the same, but the phone cards were a chore. They piled up quickly and were largely unwanted. They had wi-fi after all. Henry guessed that Iraq and Afghanistan held most of the world’s dwindling supply of phone cards like a dumpster collected VCRs.

Largely out of curiosity to how they worked, and to a lesser extent that it was his birthday, Henry grabbed one from an unsorted pile. He snuck in a handful of bubble gum and hard candy and went about deciphering the instructions on the back of the card. He popped in a gumball, took a deep breath and dialed the initial number, entered his country code, entered the receiving country code, keyed the PIN, dialed a substation.

On his third stale piece of gum that made chewing a jaw-crushing punishment, he heard a ringing in the headset and felt like he had discovered fire. He heard his father clear his throat and tentatively ask “hello?” Henry forgot about the time difference and that it was 0400 in North

Dakota, but his father was terribly excited to finally have someone to talk to since he'd left Henry's mother.

"Hello?" His father said.

"Hi?" Henry said.

"Who is this?"

Henry thought for a moment. "Eugene," he said.

"Gene! How the heck are you?" His father said and yawned.

"Okay." Henry realized he didn't have anything to say to his father. "How's business?"

"It's still real bad out there," his father said, delighted.

Henry's father was a financial planner of some renown. His renown was of being the single unluckiest investor in the history of commerce. Every time Henry's father took an interest in a financial sector or placed his money in a stock, it inevitably failed. Every risky move or safe bet backfired. There wasn't a burst bubble that he didn't have a stake in. His clients knew this and would ask for personal stock advice only to do the opposite. Word spread around until Dwayne Henry's seal of approval became a warning bell. He was paid by large companies to never mention their names or buy their stocks. Still, Dwayne Henry never got the hint and would eagerly invest all his wealth in any industry he took a shine to.

"Savings are gone, but I'm getting by. I still can't believe what happened to the housing market," he said within another yawn. Henry checked his watch and realized he didn't know what the time difference was.

"What time is it there?"

“Four o’clock in the A-M.”

“Did I wake you?”

“No! I’ve been up.” Henry heard the tell-tale sounds of bottles clinking against one another. “I left your mother!”

At that moment, sitting in a leather computer desk in a repurposed palace, Henry realized that when he placed the call he didn’t have anything to say to his father and wished back for that simpler time.

“Why?”

“This is a ‘why not’ question, Gene,” his father said. “The short answer though is that she wouldn’t leave me.” From the diction, Henry knew that the long answer was coming and hunkered down for a diatribe his father had obviously rehearsed and would unleash on the first audience.

Henry checked the time limit on the card and realized that he had 90 minutes left. He cleaned sand and dust off the particle board desk he was seated at while his father detailed the first years of courtship and the “surprise” of Henry’s conception. Henry often wondered if there was any psychological impact on a child whose first acknowledgement of existence came with an “oh shit” from their parents. Henry tapped his foot on marble floors and admired the chandelier above him as his father explained how he really thought he could fake his way through a marriage as long as a kid was involved. Henry found a pair of scissors in the desk and went about destroying the rest of the phone cards as his father pivoted to the empty nest years.

“Then it just came down to it. We were sitting at breakfast and I looked up and she was looking at me and I realized that neither of us wanted to be looking at the other. So what have you been up to?”

Henry paused in shaking sand out of his shoe, wondering why his father stopped talking. The words caught up to him. “You know. War.”

“That’s right. I’ve been telling all my—well I guess they’re your mom’s—friends now all about my boy. They say to say thanks. How’s that going?”

*

“Found one,” Ski said, voice dripping with disappointment at being the first.

Clay and Drake shot out of their chairs on the opposite wall. Henry and Koontz, in the desks closest to Ski, rolled their chairs over. Prince flexed his hand and watched the action with undisguised amazement. His new medication had a “child-like wonder at every day occurrences” side effect.

The picture was blurred, taken by accident outside the motor pool. Ski’s thumb blurred most of the shot, but the subject was there. The soldier sat in the grass and leaned against the chain link fence. His head was down and most of his face was obscured by the bill of his Patrol Cap. The only hint of a face was a dimpled chin, the only hint of the identity was the name tape on his blouse. The fabric was bunched by the lack of posture, but “Howell” was almost completely legible.

“I think I remember him now,” Drake said.

Clay nodded. “Yeah, I always used to think ‘he’s going to get grass stains his trousers like that.’”

“Shut up, Clay,” Henry said distractedly. He strained his memory to put a face on the picture but he was trying to catch smoke with a net. “Is that it?” Ski nodded.

“Yep,” Drake said on his way back to his desk. “We worked for ten minutes. Third Batt can figure out the rest.”

“When Prince wakes up, have him send it up,” Clay said, his whiny voice filled with satisfaction of a job well done.

They drifted back to their desks and finished their logins, deleted all the emails from “Gwaltney, Devin.” The man seemed to have no title anyone could discover, but was known to everyone on Fort Roth. His base update correspondences were sent to every soldier on base. They included invitations to family friendly on base activities, 10k charity runs, construction projects, calls for Special Forces recruitment, funerals, and memorial services. A Fort Roth soldier had to dig through eight G-grams before finding any message even tangentially related to them. Henry found that he actually missed them. Gwaltney, it seemed, missed him too. There were three hundred messages in Henry’s inbox.

Highsmith came back from the weekly leaders meeting. Everyone rolled their chairs back to look at their glazed and uncomfortable detachment leader, mutely asking if there was any other work to be done. Highsmith shook his head quickly, like he was shooing away a fly. They rolled back to their desks as Highsmith took his own in his office. A moment of silence later they were treated to a Secret mission briefing from 97.

Koontz rolled back enough to look at Henry with an arched eyebrow.

“This is what we do here,” Henry said. He caught sight of Drake covertly watching the exchange. Distaste for a woman or not, Drake didn’t like any of them talking to men who weren’t him. Koontz rolled back.

“This memorial won’t be Munoz-quality,” Drake said.

There was general murmurs of agreement. “Any good ones while I was gone?” Henry asked. He didn’t turn his head but said it straight to his computer screen. The POD rarely spoke to each other face to face.

“No,” Ski said, disgusted.

“Command Sergeant Major Simmons’ was pretty good,” Clay said.

“Who was,” Henry started.

“New CSM for Group Command,” Drake said. “Guy comes in two months ago all piss and vinegar. Has a sensing session with the lower-enlisted, makes us take off our name tapes so we can really air our grievances without fear.”

“He really seemed to care,” Ski said.

Drake continued. “So this guy tells all of us that he’s going to go through and fix the whole thing, make our lives better, our mission clearer, and get us actually doing our jobs. A month later he has a little party with a bottle of sleeping pills and a whiskey chaser.”

“His wife and kid were devastated,” Ski said.

“Anyone else?”

“Nah, just some bad DUI wrecks. Safety Dan had two classes.”

“Nothing like Munoz,” said Ski.

“Nothing like Munoz,” Drake agreed.

“Who,” Koontz began.

“Saddest memorial ever. Hands down,” Drake said. His chair squeaked as he turned around to address Koontz. The seal broken, Henry, Ski, and Clay turned too. “9th Battalion, ten months ago, Staff Sergeant, three kids. Ovarian cancer. Little chick lasted three years of Chemo like a champ.”

“A twinkle in her eye to the very end,” Clay said.

Drake flashed annoyance. “Shut up, Clay. The memorial was at LBJ and that’s a big church. Three hundred can fit in it.” He paused. “They had to bring in a tent for all the voluntary attendees and broadcast it. She had eight eulogizers.”

“Colonel Stoops had me weeping like an open sore,” Ski said.

Henry nodded. “Her video was fifteen minutes long. Not once did she look sad or beaten. Even at the end, when the pictures were just of her in a hospital gown she shown with confidence and a joie de vivre. I didn’t stop crying for a week.”

Drake nodded solemnly. “She had a twinkle in her eye to the end,” he said. Clay opened his mouth, but stopped at a warning look from Drake.

“How’d you all know her?”

“From the memorial,” Henry said.

Koontz checked each face and turned back to her desk. "I have to jot some notes down," she said. A look of pure venom crossed Drake's face, and he turned his chair back hard enough to bang his knees on the partition, briefly waking Prince.

Henry returned to his desk and thought about his own memorial. He knew his video would last little longer than Howell's. There would be his training photos, taken by and sold like yearbooks at every basic, AIT, and airborne school. His family shots would be only the sparse interludes of his parents fighting. His outings with friends would be Drake and Ski drinking beer or vodka in one barracks room or another.

Without realizing, Henry had started a slideshow. He found a stock picture on the internet of a man who looked somewhat like himself, found the model's name and went through a whole catalog. By the time Highsmith dismissed them for lunch, Henry had amassed a whole life cut tragically short. From college fliers, beer, jewelry, and furniture ads, Henry pieced together a Narrative that anyone would be posthumously proud of.

When Prince finally gave out, collapsing into convulsions on the floor and Ski and Drake sighed and carried him back to his room, Henry seized on the moment and sent his slideshow up to Battalion under Prince's email.

Chapter 5

Days until Bravo Company deployment: 89

Ski's car limped into the Commissary portion of the PX parking lot. Conversation had dwindled as he and Henry felt a renewed dread for the looming deployment. Any time spent out of the POD, which was immune to passage of time, carried this renewed fear. The feeling settled like an itchy cold in their stomachs. The silence was deep and pointed, only interrupted by an occasional hum from Koontz, but it deepened when the shopping center came in to view. There was a reverence to the place.

The parking lot was almost a square mile in itself and for safety reasons the lights were on at all times, cicadas swarmed so close around the bulbs they cast a gray pall around the whole place. The direct middle of the entrance was a massive glass obelisk that segregated the building in two, commissary on one side, general shopping on the other. Ski loved the place because the herd of people that populated it were worst type of unthinking dregs he had ever seen and their dead eyes and apathy made him terribly uneasy.

Henry could see tired women slumped over shopping carts swatting away cicadas as their children ran unattended through the swarm. They parked in the back of the lot. Henry attempted a withering look at Ski but didn't have the heart, so they made their way, heads down, through the parking lot at a jog. They passed the families and a horn-infused squabble over a parking spot, then the designated spots for Command Sergeant Majors and Generals—right between the handicapped and pregnant women spots—and the stands set up by unhappy boy scouts and aggressive newspaper sellers.

The automatic doors slid open and an air curtain blasted the cicadas off their backs and limbs, crushed them against their shoulders and berets. Ski looked rapidly from Henry and Koontz to the milling crowd of the atrium. Henry nodded and Ski was off amongst the shops, eateries, and kiosks, lost in a sea of uniformed patrons.

“Well at least you’re here instead of at the chapel,” Koontz said. Henry saw Ski pursuing a shop that sold only knives, which made Ski terribly uncomfortable. He shook his head at Koontz and set off.

The Post Exchange’s atrium was an economical oddity. While the PX sold everything anyone could ever need, the atrium had shops that sold everything no one needed, at an incredible mark-up. The knife shop was sandwiched between a store that exclusively sold rearview mirror flags and bumper stickers for those who wanted to fully claim an ethnicity they were only due part of, and a store that sold uniforms, rifles, canteens, and body armor for children. Henry and Koontz passed the computer store that offered payment plans at 25% interest and a kiosk that offered credit cards at 34%. Between the video game store and travel center was a set of unmarked wooden doors. Henry opened the door and entered.

They were in church. A chapel at least. Eight rows of wooden pews with worn, once-red cushions faced him, or more accurately the pulpit two dozen feet in front of him. The walls were more paint than wood, the floor was old carpeting and creaking floor boards. Lights hung from the rafters like bats, baking the room to show how much dust was in the air. Partition walls that didn’t quite reach the arched roof formed an office in the corner by the entrance, a thin stream of smoking emitted from the top. The place could hold about thirty people in theological discomfort for about an hour before they ate each other. Henry grew up in a church a lot like it, except for the wire ends that punctured the walls and sprouted from the floors.

“The old chapel,” Koontz said. “I thought they tore this place down.”

A voice grumbled from the office. “They goddamn should have.” Chaplain Swift opened his door a crack, stuck his grizzled face out. “Goddamn letter writers and traditionalists though. Well come in. I ain’t supposed to smoke in the chapel.”

The PX had grown exponentially since Henry’s stationing at Fort Roth. It began with the annexing of the commissary, but wasn’t sated. As the food court grew and the atrium was planned, the old Chapel was the only thing standing in the way of growth. A group of motivated old-timers and veterans wouldn’t let it happen though, so the PX grew around and encompassed the chapel.

“Who are you and what are you doing here?” Chaplain Swift asked, blowing smoke out of a window that opened to a brick wall. He was lean and tan, Captain bars on his uniform’s chest and a cross on his collar. His office was a humble desk stacked with folders and papers and a collection plate piled with cigarette butts.

“Specialist Henry from...”

“Henry,” Swift said, reading the nametape. “You that Henry who died?”

“No.”

Swift grunted. “That would have been something. So which Henry are you?”

“The one that didn’t.”

“Which one did?”

“No Henry died.”

“You liar. There’s more than one Henry in the world and I’m sure one of them did.”

“It wasn’t me,” Henry said.

“Bully for you. Who’s this one,” Swift said around his cigarette, motioning to Koontz.

“Specialist Koontz, Bravo 10th POEP, only here unofficially. I’d prefer not to be noticed or spoken to directly.”

“Just like all the rest of them.” Swift took a drag on the filter, blew out air. He stamped the cigarette out in a collection plate and reached for another one.

Chaplain Swift’s chapel always faced low attendance, but when the PX swallowed it, the number dwindled to zero. The PX doors were locked until 1300 on Sundays. The complex was closed so that soldiers and workers could attend religious services. It relegated Swift’s duties to overseeing memorials and counseling soldiers who wandered into the wrong door. The time off gave Swift too much time to think and smoke.

“It’s not that I liked instilling the fear of god every Sunday. Between you and me, I’m not sure all those prayers are heading anywhere.” He took another drag and sent the smoke in a stream out of the side of his mouth. His chair groaned as he leaned back. “So who did what to whom?”

“Uh,” Henry started.

“Fifteen Hail Marys sound good? I have a memorial to plan.”

“That’s not…”

Swift put fingers in his ears, his graying hair knocking ashes onto his shoulders. “I really don’t want to hear it. Look at this,” he said, gesturing with both hands at his desk and spilling

more ashes and a few embers on the folders and sheets on his desk. “Nothing but domestics and adulteries, sexual assaults and drunk driving. To justify my paycheck they have me counseling UCMJ cases. It’s like a soldier can’t see a hole without wanting to drink from it, fight it, or fuck it.” He popped open a desk drawer with a metallic grinding. Swift presented a flask to Henry and Koontz. Henry declined.

“I’m not here anyway,” Koontz said and took a long draught.

“Class Six liquor just opened in the PX,” Swift explained. He took a swig, a drag from his cigarette, another swig. “It fuels my faith,” he said. “So what are you guys here for again?”

Henry explained about Howell and the change in the memorial, which caused Swift to take two more drinks and light another cigarette before digging through his desk again.

“What religion was he?” he said in an angry drone. Yarmulkes, rosary beads, crucifixes, crosses, and other paraphernalia piled onto his desk as Henry groped for an answer.

“Non-Denominational Baptist,” Koontz said, reading from a file she had folded in her cargo pocket.

“Just a plain Baptist?” Swift asked. “That’s what I used to be,” he said, brightening.

“No,” Koontz said as she squinted at the form, “that would be Baptist, non-denominational. Howell was a Non-Denominational Baptist.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Punctuation.”

“How do they feel about suicide?”

“They’re not fans.”

Swift leaned back in his chair and slapped his stomach with both hands. “Well if he doesn’t care about his religion neither do I. It’s not as easy as a ‘no religious preference’ like this one,” he said, pointing a chin at Henry, “But I can make it work. Get out of here.”

Henry stood to leave when Swift spoke up again. “I just need a eulogist. ‘Course we have the Company and Battalion Commanders, but they really like someone who knew him well. You up for it, Not Dead Henry?”

“I didn’t know him,” Henry said.

“And what do you mean?” Swift said. He scribbled a note down, adding Henry’s name to itinerary. “You’re the one that told me he was a Baptist.”

“Non-Denominational,” Koontz said.

“That was her,” Henry said.

“I have it on very good authority that she’s not here,” Swift said. “You’ll do fine. Just give some of that ‘good soldier, loyal friend’ crap for two minutes and be done with it. Now what are you still doing here?”

“I’m starting to think I don’t have an option,” Henry said. A thought occurred. “Who was going to do mine?”

Swift looked over his sheets. “Paderewski. Didn’t sound happy about it, but volunteered. Anyway, be here Friday 0630.”

“It’s happening here?” Koontz asked.

“Yes,” Swift snapped. “Why do you think the place is being rewired?”

“Why not LBJ?”

“They’re rewiring. Would have been done by now but they had to stop to come rewire here.”

Koontz snorted. She gathered her things, shook Swift’s hand again. “Say, just what sort of chaplain are you anyway?”

Swift sparked his lighter. “That’s a personal question and none of your goddamn business. See you Friday.”

Chapter 6

Days until Bravo Company deployment: 88

On Wednesday the POD sprouted pretty green uniforms. The hung from the partitions, sheathed in plastic coverings. The usual racket of the computers booting up like corpses crawling out of their graves was absent, the lack of noise was deafening and set Henry's teeth on edge. The POD members were standing, waiting for the uniform inspection, which meant they were waiting to be released to the motor pool. First Sergeant loved uniform inspections more than any of his family members, and didn't want the soldiers who wore them to spoil the spectacle.

No one spoke. First Sergeant's reverence for Class A inspections was contagious, and his ire for breaking the silence was furious.

Henry checked over his uniform like everyone but Kim, feeling like he was looking over his notes before a final exam. Kim was seated at his desk, starting to boot up the editing equipment when Drake tapped him on his shoulder. Kim's head moved no more than an inch. He didn't like to turn his head, preferred to see the reflections in his computer screen. All the soldiers of Bravo Company were pale, grey mirror images to him. Drake motioned for him to stand and mill about like the rest. No one in Bravo knew how Kim, who spoke no English, became part of Bravo. The leading theory was that Kim was meant to be part of the 11th Pacific Enrichment Orientation Program, but 11th PEOP had no record of a PFC Kim and suggested 11th POEP try the 11th Protective Operational Programming and Equipment Battalion whose systems were always down.

Henry's dress uniform was made of heavy green wool. It was resistant to water, resilient to dirt and odor, and completely impervious to any passing breeze or comfort. He checked the

medals and achievements against his Enlisted Records Brief that showed the medals he had qualified for but didn't earn. Henry had eight of them on the right breast. They were awarded for the accomplishments he didn't achieve, the bravery he hadn't shown, and for the faithful execution of missions that had failed. It was a landscape of mediocrity, laid against a backdrop of moldy tradition. Henry checked that the medals he'd received after getting off the bus, campaign ribbon, Army Commendation, against his sheet. He adjusted his Meritorious Unit ribbon on the left breast, waited, and wished and wished that he could blame all of this on conscription.

That sent a fresh sting of self-resentment through him. He had done all of this to himself. Nothing was his fault and he had no one to blame but himself. He thought again about his old apartment, the hit-and-miss heating, the walls that held in sound like a sieve held water. He wondered if he was the only one with these fond memories and realized that he didn't know anything about what his friends did *before*. The faces, personalities, and quirks were all clear to him, but he realized as he scanned the faces that he only knew them as they are, not were, and most likely not as they will be. He looked at Ski who was bouncing on his heels. Ski winked at him, and Henry realized that he shouldn't even know any of these people.

There was a reason the POD was full of chatter.

"At ease!" came Clay's reedy voice from the hall, cracking on the second syllable. They assumed parade rest.

"Carry on," answered First Sergeant's baritone. He entered the POD with a wincing Highsmith behind him. Highsmith carried his dry cleaning with the back facing outward. He had more medals than he had chest to accommodate them.

"Motor pool," Highsmith mumbled. "Walk the Humvees."

First Sergeant Hurst, high-and-tight all over, body and uniform all sharp creases and measured angles. His face was all jowls, his eyes hooded and constantly scanning for deficiencies. Inspections were about the only thing that brought him happiness, and he looked like a bulldog hearing a can opener as he set upon Drake's uniform.

The POD fled.

*

"I think I should be team leader when we go," Drake said. They were in staggered line walking down Henry Drive, Kevlar helmets tucked under their arms.

"You don't have the rank," Clay said.

"Shut up Clay," Drake said.

"You don't have the rank," Koontz said.

"I have the authority," Drake said.

"Everyone hates you," Ski agreed.

"Just like First Sergeant. You have to hate your superiors." Drake looked around, looking for an argument. Henry was game. He had been in the mood for an argument all week.

"It's a different kind of hate," Henry said. "The hatred you inspire is more personal. It's more a list of character flaws." Henry paused to let the resounding chirping of a group of nearby cicadas to die down. "You're racist, chauvinistic, arrogant, and ignorant, but that's just the way are. You're a product of your environment. We hate you for the way you were raised and the person you are at heart, not how you choose to be."

Drake sulked and glared at Henry. “How much do you hate me, Ski?”

Ski considered it. “You’re like a hangnail, a popcorn kernel stuck in the gums, a crying baby at the opening night of a movie.”

Drake nodded, encouraged. “And First Sergeant?”

Ski tried to look away but Drake snapped his fingers at him, walked in front of Ski until he had no choice but look him in the face. Ski said “He’s a migraine. He’s a guy talking on his cell phone in the movie, on speaker phone, to a crying baby. First Sergeant has made this company, this base, this town, this army, this country, this planet worse just by being on it. There is not a thing he has done, an action he has taken that has made me do anything but smolder with rage. I want him to die slowly, terribly, and for all those he holds dear to greet him on that glorious day and spit on his withering body. And I want to watch. He,” Ski sighed, “makes me glad I’m alive.”

Drake sulked more and put on his helmet. He looked to the others. “You hate me, right Clay?”

“It wouldn’t...”

“Shut ... go on,” Drake said.

“You’re a subordinate. It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to hate you.”

“We’re all the same rank, Clay.”

“Corporal!” Clay screeched. He stopped, and being at the front of the little herd, forced everyone else to stop. They formed a loose circle around Clay’s puffing cheeks and heaving chest. “I’ve had enough of you all not giving me the respect I deserve.”

“We’re the same paygrade, Clay,” Henry said.

“I’m an NCO!” Clay said. It was true. Specialists and Corporals shared the same paygrade but a Corporal was a Non-Commissioned Officer, with all the respect due that designation.

“Because you chose it,” Henry said. “Any one of us could be Corporals but we aren’t all sniveling, pathetic, and desperate like you. The respect you deserve? We respect you as much as your wife does. What else do you want?” Clay’s wife was cheating on him, a secret that everyone knew and no one acknowledged.

Clay’s face was primed to pop. His whole face quivered before a tear leaked out. It was followed before he turned and ran at a sprint towards the motor pool. He lasted about three hundred yards before wheezing, hands on knees.

Henry wasn’t proud of himself, a familiar feeling. Drake shook his head and took off after Clay. Ski looked down at his boots as they walked along. Koontz took a notepad out of a pocket and scribbled a note.

Henry, Ski, Koontz, and Kim arrived at the Lucas R. Williams Motor Pool in silence, broken only by chirps of bugs. Clay and Drake were already at one of Bravo’s Humvees, had started it and were on their way back out. Battalion decreed that the Company Humvees were to be driven a distance of at least ten miles every month in order to be kept in working condition. It was the Humvees only purpose.

Henry and Ski always partnered on these excursions, but Koontz intercepted.

“I’m riding with Ski,” she said. “I need to talk to him. Unofficially.” She handed Henry a folder. “In the meantime, why don’t you do some of my work?”

The folder contained Howell’s full military record. “Why aren’t you doing your work?”

“I’ve been doing POEP work all week. Time for a change.”

“We haven’t done any work this week.”

“Yes, and it’s had me swamped. Just check on his last purchases and make sure it was a suicide so we can deny his life insurance.” Henry found a print out for Howell’s debit card.

When he looked up he saw that he was left with Kim and the last truck.

“But I won’t have anyone to talk to,” he said.

“What a shame for everyone,” she said.

*

Fort Roth’s location was chosen for its proximity to no place in particular. The land was untenable, rocky, and sandy. The sand was the biggest mystery because it was located nowhere near a beach. The town that grew up around it was equally squalid.

Henry rumbled the Humvee out of the gates of the Fort. There were no battlements, towers, or fortifications of any sort, just a rusted metal fence topped with barbed wire and strongly worded signs. It served, it seemed to Henry, only to keep back the encroaching clumps of pawnshops, tattoo parlors, strip clubs fast food restaurants, and used car dealerships. He sneaked a peek at Kim who was dutifully looking ahead with an unreadable expression on his face. Kim didn’t even grant him a questioning look.

“Nice town, huh?” he said to Kim, “makes you want to vacation in Flint, right?” Kim couldn’t have understood him even if they both spoke the same language. All he would have heard is a higher warbling noise over the lower one of the diesel engine. At a red light Henry checked Howell’s destinations. There were only three purchases on the day in question.

The first was twenty dollars at Appleby’s, which served as high class dining in Anderson. It was right off the strip and Henry didn’t want to stop. He didn’t want to stop at any of the places on the list, but then again he didn’t want to go back to Bravo. He pulled into the parking lot. Kim jumped out and ground-guided Henry’s Humvee into a parking spot and hopped back in as Henry got out.

The hostess gave him what was supposed to pass for an inviting wave. She asked how many were in his party and Henry explained his purpose. He asked if the man in the picture came in the previous Saturday and was already shifting his weight backward in anticipation of the response.

“Oh yeah, he said it was his last meal,” she said. “He was kind of annoying about it. How’d he do it?”

“Ate a bullet,” Henry said.

She blew out a breath. “And Pam wins the pool.”

Henry felt slightly offended at how much more flippantly this woman took Howell’s death than he did but thanked her anyway and held the door open for an elderly couple coming for an early lunch.

Thinking of driving the damn truck that handled like a dream, uncontrollable and adverse to logic, Henry was spurred by impulse. He motioned for Kim to join him for a meal. Henry ordered a lunch dish that rhymed, and ordered Kim an entrée that contained a pun. They ate in all the silence that the dozens of televisions allowed. He watched Little League baseball on a sports channel. The food was bland and the service was indifferent. He tipped well.

Before he started the Humvee again he took a close look at Howell's picture. Kim cleared his throat and Henry looked up and forgot what Howell looked like. He was a minor actor's name, a song lyric, a cousin's birthday, but Henry felt just terrible.

"Makes you wonder about the value of a soldier in a non-election year," he said to Kim who looked back and nodded, uncomprehending.

The next stop was the big one, a pawn shop named Second Chances, two hundred dollars on a used gun. It was a squat cinderblock on a half-acre of parking lot. The owner almost had enough beard to cover his chins and almost enough shirt to cover his gut. He frowned when he saw the manila folder in Henry's hand.

"I don't know nothing," he said.

"I can believe it," Henry said. He showed him the picture.

"I might've seen him," the owner said.

"Sell him a gun?"

"Nope. Not here. Waiting periods and all. He could've got it at the gun show. They'll let you just walk off with one."

"Where's this gun show?"

The owner pointed a finger at the back door. Henry walked past some of his own possessions mixed amongst lawn mowers, scooters, televisions. The owner followed behind him. Henry opened the back door and saw the empty lot and folding table under a canvas canopy. The owner piled out a minute later with a handful of firearms and a noise-maker.

Henry let the door shut, barely before the proprietor stuck a meaty paw in to stop it. He scowled at Henry as Henry went about perusing his own possessions. Looking through it all, he realized he didn't care enough to cause a stink about the theft and wouldn't pay to get any of it back. He thanked the owner and the left.

*

Henry checked into room 118 of the Motel 6 and closed the door behind him. The air conditioner hummed, banged, and wheezed. There were two full-sized beds, a tube television, taupe wallpaper, matted brown carpet, a framed piece of art painted by a painter who had given up on art.

And this is the last thing he saw, thought Henry. He sat on the bed, turned on the T.V. and watched a commercial for a strip club. He looked at the bathroom. Henry walked in, turned on the light and with it the fan. He climbed in the tub.

There was a hole in the ceiling, a test fire, Henry thought. Must have blown his ear drums right to hell. He saw a pinkish stain as he leaned his head back. How long did he deal with the ringing in his ears? Was it right away? Did he panic, cry, or did he think about how it was his choice or one made for him and just groan, roll over and sigh?

Henry pointed his right index finger, stuck up his thumb, closed his right eye to look down the sights, put it in his mouth. There was a last thought, that he had had a nice day.

Henry squeezed his thumb and fell asleep.

Chapter 7

Days until Bravo Company deployment: 88

Henry returned the Humvee at 0100 the night before Howell's memorial, Kim all unquestioning acceptance. The ride back was spent in a gut-wrenching depression which stayed with Henry all the way to the volleyball court. In that bathtub of a Motel 6 Henry was once again associated with the terrible, impotent fear of death. Henry's fear of death started at the grasping of the concept. It was a constant companion since childhood, but the fear normally hung back around the fringes of consciousness. Only on rare occasions did it jump out in front like epiphany and make him want to scream and cry and flail.

It made him want to smile.

The reason he didn't was that he knew he had lost his last great out. He knew at that moment that taking a Roman part, the quick exit, seppuku, thumbing his nose at the universe wasn't the last card in his hand anymore. Of course the Army was the second-to-last card. The thought always seemed like his olly-olly-oxen-free when life got too hard, but he conceded that he wanted life.

It was terribly depressing.

When he returned to his room he found Koontz chatting amiably with Ski. She was still in uniform, Ski in his undershirt and briefs, using his two-quart canteen as a watering can. Koontz turned on Henry.

"Where have you been?" She asked, hackles rising. "Ski has been worried sick."

Henry looked at Ski who shrugged his shoulders and frowned. "It was terrible," he said wistfully, and returned to watering his ragweed. Ski was allergic to ragweed, it made his eyes puffy and red, turned his nose into a faucet, and he spent all the time in the barracks itching the roof of his mouth with his tongue. He didn't even like the look of the plant. The windowsill had pots full of it.

"What are you doing here?" Henry asked.

"Am I here?" Koontz said.

Henry had to admit that he didn't know anymore. "I don't think he did it," Henry said.

"Who didn't do what?" Koontz said. She pulled a camera from a duffel bag on Henry's bed. "And where should I put this so you won't notice it?"

"Howell. I think the Army should pay out his life insurance."

Koontz was unimpressed. She wagged the camera at Henry. He really didn't want to ask the question. He looked to Ski who was bundling himself in a blanket, comforter, and quilt. He liked to get a good start on his insomnia.

"Why are you planting cameras in here?"

"I have a quota of observation hours on you. Speaking of which, I'm going to have to sleep here tonight. I'm a good four hours behind. Now." She shook the camera, about the size of a cigarette lighter, at him again. He said he'd never notice anything that was on top of the curtain. Koontz nodded. "So why don't you think Howell made gray-matter modern art?" She climbed on Henry's bed, her boots leaking sand and cicada limbs on the sheets.

Henry took a seat on his bed, his knees almost touching Ski's bed. "Howell purchased a glock-9." Koontz said "uh-huh," stretching to her full, inconsiderable height to reach the curtain rod. "The Army doesn't use the glock which means that he lacked the proficiency in the use of it." Koontz stopped and folded her arms at Henry.

"You're suggesting that he was too ill trained in it to shoot out the back of his head?"

"Not if you look at his last range score." He pulled the supporting document from the folder and wagged it at Koontz. She jumped from the bed and accepted the form and the rest of the packet from Henry, her tongue working on the insides of her mouth. She absentmindedly handed the camera to Henry, sat on his bed and pulled more papers from the folder.

"Just put it where you said. And don't break it. You've already signed for it," she said to her papers.

"I did no such thing."

"Well not officially," Koontz said and trailed off.

Henry took off his boots, the best moment of every day he had in the Army. Then he calculated how long it was until he had to put them back on again, the worst moment of every day he had in the Army. He mounted his bed in green-socked feet and placed the camera above the curtain rod, leaving a half-foot of cord dangling. Unsure what to do he turned to Koontz who was beaming at him, her feet swinging two inches off the floor.

"I've never been proud of you," she said.

"You mean prouder."

“I know what I said.” She clapped the folder shut. “You took the truth out to an alley and beat the hell out of it.” Henry held up the camera’s cord. “Just let it hang. I just have record that the cameras were installed. Discreetly. So how would you write this up?” She indicated Howell’s forms. “Negligent discharge?”

“That doesn’t pay. Individual training in urban environment.” Every soldier was given a life insurance policy good for \$400,000 that protected the survivors from the sudden loss of a revenue source. The Army was protected from the claimants if the death was by suicide, murder, negligence, friendly fire, disobeying orders, or wearing the wrong color socks.

Koontz bit her lip. “Why do you think the Army should pay for what happened to,” she found the name “Howell?”

“Someone should. Look, Howell was never going to go out from natural causes. He’s the guy everyone pretends real hard that they didn’t see ‘the signs’ from after he’s gone. He was just that guy, a member of that particular part of the wide net the Army recruitment casts, but from how I calculate it, he had at least another decade of misery and loneliness ahead of him before walking out in front of a bus. Someone should be reimbursed for it.”

Koontz yawned. “Speech is tomorrow, big guy,” she said and grabbed a pillow off his bed. She unzipped her ACU blouse, leaving her in a tan undershirt, and laid it out as a blanket. Ski was already tossing fitfully, leaving Henry to turn off the light. He stripped to undershirt and boxers, groped around to his bed and found that his comforter was gone.

“I get cold at night,” Koontz said. “So what’s the big speech going to be about?” She asked. Henry didn’t know, didn’t care. One informed the other. Still, he felt a familiar surge of panic as he sprawled on his back and as his eyes adjusted to the light. He could see the paint

sediments that hung like stalactites. He heard Koontz shuffling under his bed for something, but decided against asking.

I won't be able to sleep tonight, was his last thought before he drifted back to unimpressive nightmares of shrieking alarms and far-off impacts. Even in his dreams he wondered about the call of "INCOMING! INCOMING! INCOMING!" It was a recording he heard dozens of times, and the voice had, Henry admitted, the appropriate level of terror in his voice, but it was a recording. He always wondered how many takes it took, how bored the soldier who vocalized it had to have been when the approved track was recorded.

*

"INCOMING! INCOMING! INCOMING!"

He awoke to the alarm, unsurprised. The thoughts of being out of country dashed as a dream, he fell back to habit. He considered the distance to the bunker, about 300 meters and decided he'd take his chances in bed. He rolled over and hoped for the best.

"Henry," Koontz whispered. "Are you awake?" He turned back and found Koontz's face hovering a few inches from his own. "Why do you have an MPLS?" Henry's mind was slowly wrapping around the concept that he was back on Fort Roth as his mouth sputtered out questioning syllables. "Man-Pack Loudspeaker," Koontz explained "this," she held up a hand mic, keyed the button on the side and thrust it under his bed. Henry's bed gave a terrible squelch and feedback.

"Where should it be?" he said.

"Shhh, you'll wake up Ski."

“Don’t worry. He’ll hate that.”

A slew of country-accented profanities came from down the hall before Drake burst in the door, an angry visage in boxer shorts with a nimbus of the hallway lights behind him.

“What the living fuck was that?”

“Nothing Drake,” Koontz said. “We’re all asleep.”

“Is that Koontz?”

“No,” Koontz said and Drake slammed the door. Drake emitted a sound of pure venom and exasperation. The door thumped with the force of his fist, and Henry heard Drake screaming again in pain and anger.

Ski sighed luxuriantly. Henry could see his roommate shiver under his covers and heard the bed squeak under his girth.

“So you’re up now,” Koontz concluded. “Good, we need to discuss something. Ski, do you mind?”

“Terribly,” Ski said enthusiastically. He rolled over and punched his pillow into shape. Henry felt a slight pull and watched as his comforter slid off his bed. He looked down and found Koontz rolling herself into a cocoon.

“I’m cold,” Koontz said. “We need a cover.”

“You already have my comforter.”

“You know what I mean.”

“I try not to.”

“A cover, Henry,” she said after a comfortable sigh. “Now I’m going to have to stick around you until you guys go off to get shot at. We need a deflection.”

“Why don’t you just tell everyone? Seems to be working so far.”

She sighed in her cocoon, finally extracting a hand to snap her fingers at Henry. She snapped again. “Pillow,” she said expectantly. Henry handed one to her. “Thanks. And I would just tell everyone but I need to put in my report that I have successfully infiltrated the social structure of the unit.”

“Can’t you just lie?”

“Not officially,” she said.

“Look, you’ve infiltrated just fine,” Henry said.

“It’s more a matter of professionalism,” she said. Henry propped himself on his elbow to look down at her. “My reports are fantastic. They tell the whole story of a suspect, unit, and even battalion. I really dig deep, and wade in. It’s the only reason they let me take so long on an assignment. I figure Bravo will take another three months after you leave just in the composition. But I need an in, a believable cover.”

“That sounds like your job,” Henry said, sliding back to a prone position and pulling the cover up to his chin.

“We should have a relationship.”

“What?”

“Unofficially,” she said.

“Why can’t we just be friends?”

“Because you don’t like me very much.”

“True,” Henry said, tiring of the conversation. “But I just want you to know it has nothing to do with you professionally. It’s all personal,” he said and watched as the cover was whipped off him in a single jerk from Koontz.

“The comforter is too hot,” she said.

“Then give it back.”

She clicked her tongue. “I might want it later,” she said regretfully. “See friends gets me nowhere. You’re technically friends with Clay.” Henry silently admitted that she was right.

“Friendship happens due to familiarity and proximity. Lower enlisted are always friends because they have to be, they are so much flotsam in stagnant water. But a relationship causes waves.”

“It’s fraternization,” Henry said.

“That’s what makes it good. It forces reaction. Tongues will wag and people will judge, and we will see how leadership reacts, and I will have a good start on my report.”

“But it still doesn’t solve the problem of me not liking you.”

“Ah, that’s sweet. You still live in a world where that’s important to you. I don’t like you if that helps.”

It did.

Ski shifted his bulk and the springs of his bed sang out in protest. “I just don’t know if I’m ready for a fake relationship,” Henry said.

“Who is she?” Koontz taunted. “I’ve heard that you had a long correspondence with a Beth while over there. Written correspondence, no less. That takes effort.”

Henry shifted and tried to pull the covers up to his head, forgetting they were on the floor next to him. Beth was an issue he didn’t want explored. Starting to shiver in his bed, he realized he didn’t want any of his issues explored.

“This goes beyond distaste though,” Henry said. “I think I hate you.”

“There’s a serenity in hate,” Ski said. Henry looked at him and found Ski completely on his side, his head resting against a flat pillow at an extreme angle. He was looking Henry right in the eyes. “A purity, really. Like love it’s a radical emotion that clogs thoughts and prevents logic, but also like love it has no doubt and feels just great. About the only difference is that love is so much harder to find.”

Koontz propped herself up on her shoulders. Ski was not prone to monologues, and his relative silence loaned importance to them. Ski hated that. With her head turned, Henry made a grab for his comforter only to have his hand swatted away.

“I had a moment of happiness once. It was awful. I’ll always drink to forget it. But then the memory won’t cause me pain.” He looked troubled for a moment but continued. “It was just this obscenely gorgeous day in early autumn, the leaves just beginning to fall, the whole day was room temperature. I was in college and life seemed worth living. Behind my dorm I tended a little garden because I liked to do that and I thought someone might pay me for it one day. I can see it now if I think about it.” He raked a meaty paw down his face. “Goddamn birds singing their goddamn heads off as I went out to see if my unofficial pet rabbit had come for a visit. And lo, the little bastard was there, nibbling on some stalks, something from the mint family. Real

slow, I crouch down and hold out my hand. Rabbits are skittish by nature, but I swear to this day that he could see my soul and knew I meant him no harm. The son of a bitch hops up to me. He sniffed my hand and lets me get one good pet in before the wind blows up some fallen leaves and he bolts. I swear though, he turned back and nodded. Like he was thanking me.”

Ski heaved himself onto his back to stare at the ceiling, shaking with discomfort. “The rest of my life has been thankfully miserable. For that moment though, I felt happy, through and through. There was not a negative thought in my head. I felt my heart beating and I was at one with it. But then I knew that it was only a moment, and it was fading, and the more I tried to hold on to it the faster it left. The spell was broken. What was left was loss, resentment, and anger. I knew then that happiness is a spark in a windstorm, but hatred is a fire in a hearth.”

It was the most Henry had heard Ski speak at once. He knew Ski would appreciate an interruption but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“I guess that makes you career,” Koontz said.

“Nah,” Ski said. “The Army is just too much of a bad thing.” He rolled over, leaving Henry and Koontz staring at his back. “Good night.”

*

Henry trudged through the PX parking lot on the morning of Howell’s memorial, bleary-eyed and fighting through the swarm of cicadas. The sky was a forbidding and angry overcast that Henry knew would result in a ten minute apocalypse of a thunderstorm before burning off into pure humidity and sunshine. Koontz tagged along, rubbing at a stiff neck from sleeping on the floor.

“So what’s the big eulogy going to be about?” she asked.

“I really don’t have the energy for this. Do you?” She opened her mouth to protest but a yawn escaped instead. She shook her head.

“So what are you going to say?” she asked anyway.

“The truth,” Henry said and waited for a response. On his day out, on his deployment, and every day since he first stepped in that recruiter’s office between the Quizno’s and Christian bookstore, Henry had gathered truths. Truths about the Army, the wars, the country. None of them made him happier or wiser, and he was set to loose them on the memorial. He imagined gasps and exclamations, an ashamed Major Barrymore shaking his head and First Sergeant diving to tackle Henry away from the microphone. They’d serve him his dismissal papers right there.

“I really don’t have the energy for this,” she said.

They walked in silence, brushing off insects from their dress uniforms. The uniforms were thick wool and Henry always felt starched when wearing it. The uniform seemed to want to hang rigid from a hangar and fought any attempt to exit that position. It was like Henry was piloting his uniform around.

Henry noticed that Koontz’s uniform was heavily redacted. Whole rows of ribbons and citations were covered in black tape. Her name badge was bracketed with quotations. Her rank and unit patch were held on with safety pins.

They passed through the automatic doors to nearly abandoned shopping center. Henry winced at pans banging against other pans in the eateries, as the morning shifts were preparing

them to hold hot food-like garbage for the masses. This might have piqued Henry's interest a few years prior, to see behind this little curtain of society, the tired ballet of morning workers, but he had come to respect a curtain more and more.

They walked into the chapel and five sets of eyes briefly took in the pair before turning back to their tasks. Chaplain Swift was proudly showing one of the new speakers to Major Barrymore and First Sergeant. The speakers were new, half as large as a man and heavy enough to bow the beams they were attached to. As Henry took in his surroundings, he noticed that it was one of many changes to the chapel since he had seen it last. He saw dozens holes drilled into the cracking walls, white pinpricks on the nicotine-stained paint. A television was hung on wires in front of the crucifix. It showed the footage that Clay was filming from a table in the back.

While Koontz picked out a pew in the back to lounge in, Henry sidled up to Clay who straightened his back and gave a sniff at the approach. Henry sighed inwardly, knowing that any attack on Clay's worldview only made caused a persecution complex that strengthened his resolve. The last time Drake challenged Clay's rank, Clay spent two days marching everywhere he went, complete with crisp, 90 degree turns. Henry drew a breath, thinking of an apology.

"Corporal," Clay said without looking. Thankful, Henry nodded and took a seat across from the lounging Koontz.

"I suppose we'll start the run-through," Swift said. "Unless the Group Commander is coming."

"Nah," Colonel Stoops said "he only comes out for Special Forces memorials." Major Barrymore let out an anxious breath at the news.

"Alright, let's..." Swift started

“I could have been SF,” Stoops said.

“And they’d have been lucky to have you sir,” Barrymore said.

Henry saw the back of Stoops’ head nod gravely.

“As for the run...”

“Just make it quick,” the Colonel said “I’ve done this a hundred times.” He stood and positioned himself behind the podium, his jacket unbuttoned, shirt untucked, and a cast on his right arm bulging out his sleeve. Lieutenant Colonel Stoops was slight and spry, an effortless confidence about his person at all times. Overseeing an Infantry Division during pre-surge era, he boasted that he had overseen more memorial services than any other Officer on post. His arm was in a cast because he had tried to land his parachute standing up, like the Special Forces do. It didn’t matter to him that Special Forces parachutes fall at half the speed of the one he was wearing at the time.

“Clay, play the video,” Swift said.

“Someone needs to help me get dressed,” Stoops said.

Clay froze. He was caught in a run-down of obeying a ranking officer or obeying a clergyman. Stuck between god and country and too loyal to think for himself, Clay started shaking and emitting a creaking noise out of his mouth. Henry saw his opportunity.

“I’ll play the video, Corporal, why don’t you help the Colonel?”

“Corporal,” Clay said as he rushed by to help the injured Colonel with his buttons. Henry went behind Clay’s table and pressed the play button on the laptop.

“That’ll do,” Stoops said before the first sounds vibrated the walls and caused the lulled cicadas in the rafters to stir. They chirped disinterestedly as Henry paused the video and the wall hangings settled back in place.

“Is that him?” Stoops whispered to Barrymore.

“Is that who?” Barrymore whispered back. His whisper awakened the cicadas again.

“Henry,” Stoops said, slapping away Clay’s shaking hands as they attempted the top button on Stoops’ collar.

“Yes sir, but not a dead one,” Swift said.

“Looking forward to your speech, son” Stoops said too politely. Henry said his “yes sir” and wondered what he had done to offend the man, and wondered if it was enough to get him kicked out.

“Then I will start,” Swift said, taking his spot behind the podium. “Remarks complete,” he said into the mic, Henry saw the sound bars jump to red as the words exited the speakers like thunderclaps. “Then it will be Major Barrymore,” Stoops said.

Barrymore broke out in an instant sweat when he walked on the stage. Barrymore liked being in front of people less than he liked being in command of them, and breathed a dry “remarks complete” into the microphone that barely registered on the instruments before hurriedly attempting to duck down in the front row.

“Then Colonel Stoops,” Swift said.

Colonel Stoops, trailing a frantic Clay who was working the Colonel’s tie, made a quick pass, turning his head to the side to give a “remarks complete” that sent the walls quaking again.

“And then Henry,” Swift said.

“Let’s hear it, key note,” Stoops said.

That was when Henry remembered. Of all the briefs he’d forgotten and been half-awake for, one thing remained constant. Colonel Stoops was the MC. He started and finished every Battalion training with a long irrelevant diatribe that had little to do with the subject and a lot to do with Toastmasters. Henry knew very little about the organization, but guessed from Stoops’ speeches that the most important thing taught at Toastmasters was how important Toastmasters is. Henry had just stolen the spotlight of the most powerful officer available.

He wanted to smile. He took the podium in a smooth motion, opened his mouth.

“Great stuff kid,” Stoops said. He tried to clap unsuccessfully and then tried to control to a grimace of pain unsuccessfully. “Why does the friend get to go last? Remind me to change that, Barrymore. Whose idea was that anyway?”

“Yours, sir,” Swift said.

“Whose?”

“The Battalion Commander’s,” Swift said.

Stoops rubbed his chin with his good hand. “Well he must have had his reasons,” Stoops said. “Doesn’t matter, I’m going to kill it. Isn’t that right,” he read the name badge “Clay?”

Clay straightened to attention. “No doubt, sir.”

“Why would there be doubt?”

“There isn’t any, sir.”

“Any what?”

“Doubt, sir.”

“You said it again!”

“Clay,” First Sergeant said. His voice roused the cicadas to a full choir. For a moment, Clay’s face and enthusiasm fell before he dropped to the floor and shouted out “one, First Sergeant. Two, First Sergeant,” with each push up.

Henry watched with in sad amusement as Clay started struggling at “six, First Sergeant.” Despite years of being dropped for minor offenses, his form and stamina never improved. His face was a pimple ready to pop at ten, his legs and arms shook at twelve. He looked like a new-born giraffe trying to impregnate the carpet.

Stoops stood and stepped around the puddle of Clay and looked for someone else to validate him. His eyes passed over Henry before returning and narrowing at the rank on his sleeves.

“Didn’t I make him a Sergeant?” He asked Barrymore while staring at Henry.

Barrymore blanched, his lip quivered. First Sergeant turned from his observation of Clay, his rage finding a new target. Henry

“We’re fixing that now, sir,” Koontz said, rising from her nap in the back pew, hair matted on the right side. “We’re heading to Clothing and Sales after the rehearsal.”

“Who are you?”

Koontz looked puzzled and looked down at her badge. “Koontz, sir.”

Stoops scrutinized her uniform, noting the redactions. “You CID? Barrymore, why do you have CID in your unit?”

“Not officially,” First Sergeant said before Koontz could.

“Who’s CID?” Swift asked.

“Is it me?” Clay groaned before a coughing fit overtook him.

“I could have been CID,” Stoops said.

“Who’s a Sergeant?” Barrymore asked.

Koontz motioned for Henry to come and ambled to the door to wait. “Congratulations. Sergeant,” she said as they left the chapel to the sounds of Clay retching.

*

Henry felt himself glide through the PX on the way to get his Sergeant patches sewn on. A blink and he was at Cosmetics, dodging cologne and perfume sprays. A blink later and he was passing a rack of magazines and Koontz was looking at him, waiting for a response. He hadn’t heard what she said. A blink later and he was seated in a seat with a flattened cushion with his jacket off.

Time was running together again. Frantic was becoming boring and boring was turning into apathy. Henry’s life had been a long fight with apathy, and he cared less and less that he was losing as it wore on.

“What if I just go back?” he said and turned to the empty chair next to him. Koontz was at the counter and looked back at him quizzically, collected something from the cashier and took her seat.

“What was that?” Koontz said, admiring a new ACU nametape which read “Richards.”

“What if I just let it happen?”

“Let what happen?” Drake said, entering the small shop at the back of the PX holding an ascot in one hand and a POEP unit patch in the other. Drake was selected to be an usher for the memorial.

Koontz looked from Henry to Drake and took a steadying breath, let it pass, and grudgingly lowered her head to Henry’s shoulder, her bony cheek grinded against his bony shoulder. Drake convulsed and stormed up to the counter to have his ascot sewn. He resolutely kept his back turned to Koontz and Henry.

“You’ll probably live,” she said and fidgeted with the bottom of her jacket.

“I might not.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“I have plans,” Henry said.

“That’s surprising. What plans are these?”

Henry told her of the life he envisioned of alimony and audits, ending with an undignified stroke in a gas station bathroom. He felt her nod against his shoulder. They both willed Drake’s job to be finished quicker.

“Officially, that sounds like a life not worth fighting for.”

“But it’s mine. I’ve earned it. I’m from the Midwest, I don’t ask for more than what I’ve earned.”

The woman behind the counter held up another name tape. "Timmons?" she asked. Koontz bolted to the counter to collect it and slowly paced back the ten feet to her seat beside Henry. Drake shot a look at Henry that was both questioning and menacing. Henry shrugged. Koontz, haltingly, lowered her head back to his shoulder.

"This is terribly uncomfortable," Henry said.

"It really is," she said, taking a moment to massage her cheek. She returned her head as she saw Drake's head edging to the side. Henry was sure part of her skull was piercing a vital tendon in his shoulder.

"You smell," she said after a moment.

"I see and taste too." Henry felt a hot exhalation from Koontz's nostrils on his bicep. "All my deodorant was stolen."

"Eugene?" the cashier said with another nametape.

Koontz was off again. By the time she was back to her seat though, the ascot was finished. Drake left without looking at either of them.

"And that's the tip of the spear," she said and shook her head. Henry shook some of the tension out of his shoulders and arms.

"Why the nametapes?"

Koontz placed her stack of them in the inside pocket of her jacket. "I'm trying to trick myself into an existential crisis." Henry didn't bother asking the question. "I've been on ten undercover assignments, each one with a different name and backstory. By all rights, I should

have no sense of self left. Each one should have cracked my psyche but my psyche is one resilient bastard and still remembers the name of my second grade teacher.”

Clay stumbled into the shop, holding his spit-and-bile-stained tie out in front of him. His dedication wouldn't allow him to take it off as he searched a rack for a replacement. Koontz ensnared Henry's hand with one of her own.

“Why would you want to do that?” Henry asked, trying not to notice Clay's eyes widening. Koontz pensively scrunched up her mouth.

“When do you get out?” she asked.

Henry told her. His contract termination date was etched in his mind right next to his birthday. He asked her the same. It was a courtesy, an automatic response. He was losing feeling in hand and his fingers were turning white.

“I have eight years.” Henry whistled. “Two years ago I goofed and signed a ten year reenlistment. So I decided to go a little nuts. If I'm confined to a place where two people can have a conversation about when they get out while next to the Commissary, I don't want to be sane for it.” She released Henry's hand, cast a disgusted look at him and wiped the sweat on her hand on Henry's knee. Clay was sneaking a peek as the cashier was running his card. She threw her head on his shoulder again. “Lately I'm thinking it needs to come sooner rather than later. I'm hoping changing my name once a week will accelerate the process.”

Clay changed his tie and deposited the spoiled one in a trashcan. He left, noticeably not noticing Henry and Koontz.

*

“I say we go for the record,” First Sergeant was saying to Swift. “We have important training to do.” They briefly took note of Henry and Koontz entering the chapel.

“Twelve minutes?” Swift said, putting his hands on his hips. “I managed fifteen once.” He clapped his hands. “But I’m up for a challenge.” First Sergeant nodded with a force that could break bricks. He looked at Henry, checked that the rank was right and marched to Clay’s table, adjusting turning the volume up on the speakers so the crowd would be restless and ready to leave. “You will follow my signals and stay here until the ceremony is finished, understood?” Before Clay could answer, First Sergeant marched to the front of the chapel which was filled with meandering Bravo Company soldiers that hushed as he passed.

Henry itched at the fresh stiches on his arm and went to check on Clay. Koontz slapped his hand away. “Feeling better Clay?” he asked with tepid concern.

“Corporal,” Clay said sullenly. His head darted towards Henry, ready to give a beady-eyed glare that was always more embarrassing than intimidating. His eyes widened as he saw the new patches. “Sergeant,” Clay corrected and stood at parade rest. It hit Henry like a punch to the gut. Henry numbly walked to his seat.

Bravo Company settled into the pews and checked their watches, muted their phones. Drake was the last to enter, ushering in the family of the deceased. Three of them in all, the Howells were dressed in torn blue jeans and collared shirts. As always, the family looked put-upon and out of place, islands of semi-formal dress in a sea of green, sneakers blending poorly with polished boots. In the silence, Henry heard a distinct cracking noise in the wall to his right.

Henry was directly to the left of Stoops and the right First Sergeant, who started a timer on his watch, snapped his fingers at Clay and pointed at Swift. The screen behind the podium

faded into Henry's death photo along with the years of his life. "Paper work is still processing," Stoops whispered to Henry. The Howells looked at each other, gathered their things and sneaked out of the chapel in full view of everyone as Swift took the stage.

"Our father we're gathered here on terrible circumstances to offer up to you your son Sergeant Eugene Henry in the hope that we can learn from his life and heal from the pain his leaving has caused. For it is no tour to judge but yours and yours alone. We pray that you welcome Henry into your fold and guide the souls of the brave men and women gathered here today. In Jesus' name we pray."

"Amen," First Sergeant yelled. Bravo echoed and the cicadas chimed in.

"Here to speak is the commanding officer of Bravo Company 11th Battalion POE PMajor Barrymore," Swift continued. He jumped off the stage to an appreciative nod by First Sergeant.

Major Barrymore took the stage, a quaking mountain in green wool. He liked giving speeches less than he did being depended upon. "Good morning," he stammered into the microphone, his amplified voice causing the speakers to spew feedback and the building to groan. The cicadas in the rafters, like rats foretelling an earthquake, stirred to a frenzy and descended on to the crowd and hurled themselves futilely against the doors and windows. Murmurs sprang up from the crowd. "Uh," Barrymore said, causing more feedback. "Remarks complete," he said and ran back to his seat, panting. The murmurs and groans continued, dust rained from the ceiling. First Sergeant checked his timer and stood to face his Company.

"AT EASE!"

The groans subsided and the cicadas continued to buzz as they collided with solid surfaces and each other, but Bravo Company was silent. First Sergeant's at-ease call could stop a heart attack. He checked the timer again and nodded to Stoops.

Stoops rose slowly from his seat, grabbed at an index card in his jacket pocket as he plodded up to the podium, each step slower than the last. Henry saw First Sergeant's jaw clench and his eyes dart down to the ever-increasing time as Stoops took a deep breath and looked up from his index card, a lost look on his face like he didn't expect to see a Company of soldiers staring at him. He crumbled the card in one fist. He stepped away from the podium and sat on the edge of the stage.

"Bravo Company," Stoops said, shook his head. "Men." He shook his head again. "Friends." He nodded gravely. "It is my greatest pleasure to serve with you, my greatest honor to have command of such a group, and my deepest regret to say that I have failed you." He paused and dropped his head. First Sergeant ground his teeth. "The first job of any commanding officer is to deliver his men safely back to their families." He looked at Bravo Company with red eyes. "I failed Sergeant Henry, and I have failed all of you who loved and respected him." Stoops stood and tossed the crumpled card at Henry's feet. "But I won't again. In this house of the lord, I promise—I swear—that I will not do so again." Choked with emotion, he put a fist to quivering lips. He gave a small, violent shake of his head before continuing. "You will attend my memorial before you will another member of your great Company. That... That, I promise you." He took his seat to a chorus of golf claps. Stoops winked at Henry and motioned to the crumpled index card.

Henry snatched it and found that it was blank. The Colonel, Henry admitted, was very good.

First Sergeant, seeing that the time was barely enough to fit in the video, snapped his fingers at Clay and put a heavy hand on Henry's shoulder.

The first somber chords of *Proud to be an American* ripped out of the speakers like thunderclaps. The groans became sharp cracks from the support beams as the slide show Henry prepared started. Lights flickered and the crucifix fell to crush the podium.

Discipline a distant memory, Bravo Company fled to the exit and poured into the atrium. Henry clawed and elbowed with the rest of them as light fixtures fell and support beams buckled. Still, he was the last one out of the building. Henry gave one look back and saw Clay still at his post, determined to finish the video as ordered.

“Clay!” Henry screamed. Clay looked back, sweating, blubbering, yet resigned, either unwilling or unable to disobey. “Run!” Henry’s first attempt at an order was received with a mouth full of dust and debris as the chapel collapsed, the force tossing him like a leaf in the breeze.

*

Henry came to. He saw Koontz and Ski and First Sergeant looking down at him. He looked down and between his boots and saw Highsmith picking his way carefully through the rubble. Highsmith lifted what was once part of the chapel’s roof and grimaced at what he saw. He shook his head at First Sergeant.

“All accounted for, sir,” First Sergeant said to Stoops. “First Class-A inspection is on Wednesday. Get those suits to the dry cleaners,” he said to his Company.

Guardians of Freedom

Part Two: Battalion Needs Bodies

Chapter 9

Days until Bravo Company deployment: 55

Henry didn't sleep the night before his disciplinary hearing. He certainly could, he was dog tired, bone-weary, and mentally exhausted, but he stayed up and stared into the soft glow from Ski's computer that lit up the room they shared. Henry hunched over it with his head tilted to catch the small amount of volume eking out of the speakers. Neither he nor Ski cared about the volume, but Koontz was staying over because she forgot where her room was and he didn't want to wake her. She had had a hard time of things. Henry considered turning it off completely but was too optimistic, and when optimism surged up in Henry's gullet he watched conspiracy videos.

He was a purist about them. Friends in college had long ago diverted to user-posted videos recorded on webcams, favoring the deeper catalog and quicker turn around, but Henry needed production value. He relished the gravelly voice of Alex Jones over ambient dark tones, cherished a still image that suddenly turned to an evil-looking negative with bold faced words imposed over it.

"Do you think some guys in a CAVE can..." Henry twisted the volume knob down and looked at the sleeping forms behind him. Alex Jones was an excitable sort, but Henry just couldn't get into it. Once again he considered closing the laptop and catching an hour or so of sleep, but he wanted to spend every waking moment of his last day in the uniform he wasn't fit

to wear anymore. Henry checked his watch, found that he only had an hour and a half left until that glorious decision.

They were well and truly sunk, Henry, Ski, and Koontz. They had planned it that way.

But the videos weren't helping. Henry's stubborn logic disputed every point the video brought up. Yes, a plane had flown into the Empire State Building, but that was in the thirties, and a two seater. Sure, jet fuel doesn't burn hot enough to melt through steel, but a 747 crashing into a building was never tested in a lab, also it didn't have to melt through as much as bend under the weight of 50 stories of building to cause a collapse. His enthusiasm melted away like the adrenaline and alcohol in his bloodstream.

It just didn't make sense to him anymore. It didn't really make sense to him when he believed it from age 19-22, but it made him feel enlightened. Religion was gone for him at that age, so feeling like he was on the side of good in a clandestine war against an all-powerful cabal was exciting and empowering. There were two ways to look at it, young Henry thought, the media lies or the truth they didn't want you to know. He envied the faith of those who could still buy what he was watching. He still agreed that there were two ways to look at the issue, but experience had darkened his prospective. His thoughts the day of his disciplinary hearing, the two ways were this: 1. The world was run by a group of political and economic leaders that had engineered every war since WWI but still, somehow, hadn't achieved world dominance; or 2. The world was really run by people, people who were trying their best. Henry weighed which one was more depressing, thus more likely, and closed the computer at 0530.

5:30 A.M., he corrected himself. He slapped Ski's leg and shook Koontz awake.

"Let's go get kicked out of the Army," he said.

They got ready in various states of excitement. Henry was buzzing with the last ounces of energy two days of no sleep left him with, Ski watered his plants and hocked up phlegm into a wastepaper basket, Koontz dumbly took in her surroundings as if seeing them for the first time. Henry debated on shaving, thinking a disheveled look would help in the sentencing, but dragged a razor down his face anyway, enjoying the last time he would be under orders to shave. He took a step further and donned his “show” uniform. Every soldier had a uniform they wouldn’t wear to work or the field. They saved their best uniform, the ones with the best digital pattern for days they would be viewed by superiors. They got ready and almost skipped over to the Company area.

*

They sat in the folding chairs outside Major Barrymore’s office in various states of unease. Ski looked like he had forgotten something, the pressure of being close to getting what he wanted causing him great discomfort. Koontz didn’t know where “Koontz” was from and where she would end up. Henry’s legs, once tapping out an uneven and jittery rhythm, stopped as 0600 approached. He was so close. As always, he was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

At 0600 exactly, he rapped his knuckles twice on Barrymore’s door.

“Enter,” Barrymore said.

They donned their berets, sidled along the space not taken up by Barrymore’s desk. Barrymore sat in his desk, looking lost and afraid. First Sergeant hovered behind him with no expression. Henry gave a sharp salute as was appropriate for a hearing. Barrymore swiveled in his chair, almost burying his massive head in First Sergeant’s chest.

“Sergeants Henry and Koontz, Specialist Paderewski reporting as ordered, sir,” Henry said.

“At ease,” First Sergeant said. They slid their hands behind their backs, Henry’s elbow banged painfully into Koontz’s, whose other elbow banged painfully into Ski’s.

“Paderewski?” Barrymore asked. He looked up when he thought it was safe.

“Me, sir,” Ski said.

Barrymore looked at Ski’s nametape and back up to Ski. “Huh,” he said. He cleared his throat and read from the paper on his desk, his voice wobbling and breaking. “As all parties are present, I am to inform you, the accused, that this is a preliminary disciplinary hearing in the matters leading up to and including the date of June the 26th. The charges are as follows: theft and misuse of military equipment, operating a military vehicle under the influence of alcohol, and conduct unbecoming of a member of the armed services.” Barrymore wheezed out the last, his mouth dry. He gulped coffee from his cup. “Before we began, do you have anything to say on your behalf?” He asked, eyes pleading.

“Drunk and disorderly,” Henry said. “We’d like to have that added to the charges.” Koontz and Ski nodded.

“Are you...?”

“We’re willing to be,” Henry said. Koontz and Ski nodded again.

Barrymore took a huge breath and let it out through his nose, causing the mass of maps and leave forms to flutter around in the miniature hurricane. “Uh, very well. First Sergeant, you may begin your questions.”

First Sergeant, hands knitted behind his back, didn't take a breath, didn't shift his weight. He rattled off his first question like he was primed.

"Who was driving the vehicle?"

Henry answered just as quickly. "We all were, First Sergeant. We took turns."

"Would you say you drink a lot?" Barrymore asked the lot of them.

"Not officially," Koontz said.

"Depends on how sober I am," Ski said.

"On a military base that's a relative term, sir," Henry said. Barrymore cringed at the title and Henry cursed himself.

"Do you think you need help?"

"Desperately, sir, just not with drinking," Ski said.

Barrymore took another ragged breath and blew coffee and spoiled creamer stink on the accused. "For the love of... You're facing the Uniform Code of Military Justice here. A dishonorable discharge. Will you guys please take this seriously?"

"On the contrary," Henry said. "I've never taken anything in my career more seriously. I'd actually like to take this opportunity to take full responsibility for the actions of my subordinates."

"Like hell you will," Koontz said.

"Over my bloated corpse," Ski said. "Henry hardly drove. In fact, I call my own memory into question. I was so monumentally impaired I can't say for sure if he drove at all."

“I’m not even sure he was drunk,” Koontz agreed.

Barrymore beamed at his soldiers and leaned back in his chair, appeased. He motioned for First Sergeant to continue.

“Let’s start at the beginning. Sergeant Henry,” he snapped. Henry felt a tingle of fear and nerves and hated himself for it. “When and where did you acquire the vehicle?”

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Days until Bravo Company deployment: 78

Bravo Company’s pre-deployment training began in earnest after Clay’s memorial. Henry was promoted to the rank of Sergeant, officially, thirty minutes before he and the rest of Bravo Company were loaded into a convoy and dropped off in a forest for the required land navigation training.

“So how does it feel?” Koontz asked, nearly screaming over the wails of countless cicadas. They hung from the trees like a second coating of bark, more numerous than the pine cones on the ground and the barbs that snagged Henry’s trousers, and the beads of sweat on his face. They blotted out the little light that passed through the canopy of needles and leaves.

“I can’t put a word on it,” Henry said, troubled.

“You can use more.”

“No,” Henry said. “It only deserves the one.”

Henry liked a good one-word description of a complex situation. The simplicity appealed to him, like the description of the Division soldier who had died the week prior on an airborne training jump. The PFC “came in hot,” with his back to the wind, forcing his parachute to the

ground. The parachutes Division used fell at 14-20 feet per second and every jumper hits the ground like a sack of potatoes, but with the extra force lent by the wind, the jumper's back folded like a cheap table in the wrong direction. He kicked himself in the head—the top of his head—with the bottom of his foot. Henry appreciated the simple description: Q: “What happened?” A: “Scorpion.”

Henry's promotion brought up a lot of words that he didn't want to think about. The ceremony itself was brief, as was the wont of First Sergeant. After the words were through, First Sergeant ripped off Henry's Specialist rank off the Velcro patch on his chest and applied the chevrons of a Sergeant. Bravo Company knew the routine and formed a line. Bravo Company, as the pre-deployment training showed, didn't know how to do much, and even less well, but no one escapes the Army without knowing how to queue. Henry stood at the front to collect handshakes and punches from them. As far as he could tell, the handshake showed respect and the punching of the rank insignia showed how much soldiers liked to punch things. He both dreaded and welcomed what he imagined would be a deep bruise on his sternum as penance for taking a rank he didn't deserve, but while the handshakes were insincere, the punches weren't even worth the name. Each soldier shook and punched and went back to formation for the next thing he would be ordered to do.

There were the exceptions. Drake wouldn't look Henry in the eye before rearing back like he was trying to knock down a door. Highsmith shook his hand, eyes looking at something either ten yards or twenty years behind Henry and put a steadying hand on his shoulder. Prince said his new medication caused cuticle contusions, he didn't know what that meant, but wouldn't risk either handshake or punch. Ski hugged him and didn't let go until neither of them could take it anymore.

And then Bravo Company reformed and the business of the day was laid out. Henry was deeply hurt by how little everyone hated him. Henry always imagined that he had done enough to be hated, hoped that someone wished him dead, and dreamed that someone might try to make it happen. Bravo Company's lack of disrespect offended his honor.

"I essentially stole a rank I don't want from a man who didn't deserve it and now have authority I'm not ready for," Henry told Koontz. "There's got to be a word for that."

Koontz took a swig from her canteen, a sweating rubber bladder that hung from all Bravo soldiers that day. She grimaced and pulled her own Specialist rank off, threw it in a pile of rotting foliage and put on a Sergeant's rank. It was the second change to her uniform that day, having changed names from Koontz to Martin earlier that morning. She looked up at the trees, thoughtfully, and shook her head.

"Ski would be good at this. He loves to expound on an issue. Where is he?"

"Are we at the meeting point?" Koontz asked.

Henry consulted his map and protractor and compass. "How would I know?"

Land navigation was a necessary and potentially life-saving skill that no one in the Army is good at or cares about. Henry's belief was that if his life came down to him having a map alone in a combat zone it would mean that all the Humvees and GPS trackers and men with guns who did the actual fighting were destroyed and at that point he'd rather just lay down and die than be shot with an unfolded map in front of him like he was a lost tourist. The rest of the POD agreed, and after the battle-buddy teams of two were set out with a list of coordinates to find, the POD set up a rally point to compare points.

“Army.” Ski’s voice proceeded the sound of tired legs tearing through underbrush. He led Prince by the arm through a wall of brambles and vines. Henry and Koontz nodded at the pair as Prince sat heavily down on a rotting log and panted.

“Army,” Ski said again and shook his head, beads of sweat cascaded off his brow and onto his map. Koontz grabbed it from him and went about comparing notes left by previous soldiers. The training consisted of each pair to receive three sets of coordinates. The coordinates were to be plotted and the soldiers were to find them in the field and write the code on the sign down for proof. The Army kept the maps for years and never changed the coordinate markers. If a soldier looked hard enough, they could find hidden notes on the map that revealed what code the coordinate markers were on. The rub of it was that one couldn’t be sure if the cheats were legitimate help or someone being an asshole.

“Well two of them match up,” Koontz said. “We’ll need Kim and Drake’s map to be sure though.”

“We’re here,” Drake said, appearing soundlessly from behind a tree, Kim scrutinizing the map. The POD looked up and pointedly ignored Drake.

“How long is this going to keep going?” Drake said in a huff.

Everyone pretended they didn’t hear him. Koontz conferred with the maps, marking the code from Prince’s points against all three maps. Henry didn’t know if Drake really deserved all of the punishment he’d received in the week since Clay’s memorial, but not enough to call for a stop to it.

The morning of Clay’s memorial, Henry, under a strict regimen dictated by Ski to work on his tolerance to alcohol lost down range, looked through sandy eyes at the LBJ chapel. It was

an airy and sterile building, Bravo Company barely made a dent in the seating capacity, barely whispering conversations while taking in the grandeur. Ski ran a finger down the polished wood of the pew. It produced a satisfying squeak. The lights were enough to light a Broadway stage or an operating room. They sent needles straight into Henry's brain. He held his head in his hands, trying to dispel the lingering physical and psychological misery when Koontz sent a sharp elbow between two ribs.

He looked lazy daggers at her and then turned to where she was pointing. All conversation lulled as Drake escorted Clay's wife to her seat in the front pew. It stopped completely when he plopped down next to her and took her hand, his neck and head determinedly facing front.

Natalie, Henry thought. How could she?

"What an unbelievable bastard," Ski had said in giddy amazement.

It really wasn't fair to Drake, Henry knew, and pretending he wasn't there was an admittedly childish way to deal with the complex situation. But it was nice to have a visible target.

After Drake died, though, was when Henry really felt bad about it.

"Well," Koontz said. "We all have one point that doesn't match up."

"Army," Ski said, exasperated. He looked like he was melting in the summer sun.

Drake stormed over and checked the maps and the one point left to find and handed the map to Kim. No one could understand how Kim could understand maps, but after a moment of

laying the map on the ground and tracing a line with a paper ruler, he took off at a pace that made the rest of the POD groan.

“Ski,” Henry said between heavy breaths. “I’m looking for a word to describe my recent promotion to the ranks of the Non-Commissioned Officers.”

“How about affirmative action?” Drake said from the front of the group, nearest to a quickly fading Kim. Henry swallowed a response, remembering the agreement to ignore Drake. He looked around and the others were also seeing the problem with their plan.

“Why else would the woman and the Jew get picked up instead of someone worthwhile?” Drake, of course, thought he was that someone. When this was greeted with silence, Drake took the initiative. “You guys just can’t stand to see the white man succeed. Makes one wonder what good being in the majority is anymore. Now if you’ll spare an ear, I’ll let you in on the whole Zionist plot,” Drake said loudly to the trees and bugs.

“Where’d Kim go?” Henry asked, thankful for the distraction.

“Huh?” Drake said. In finding his new power, he’d lost track of the Korean. “Should have put a bell on him.” He whistled and clapped his hands. Everyone else pulled up, scanned the forest, and shrugged.

Stealthy but wide-eyed with excitement, Kim burst through the trees, pointing to where he had come from and saying things no one could understand.

“I think he’s found something,” Drake said.

They followed Kim off the path, taking high steps over the undergrowth. Kim had disappeared again, but they were able to follow the trampled plant life to an ugly mound of

leaves and dirt. Kim presented it to them breathless. He cleared away some caked-on dirt to reveal a door handle, then a side window. With more sighing than interest, the POD soldiers cleared away the muck and found a perfectly serviceable Humvee underneath it all.

It was archaic. The model was missing the two extra tons of armor that Henry was used to, a relic from a time when IED wasn't in the popular lexicon. Still, when Henry turned the ignition—Humvees have no keys—the diesel engine roared and belched mulch and black smoke out of the exhaust pipe. This was a shock to all of them. The vehicle was a dinosaur compared to the up-armored Humvees, which were quickly being phased out in favor of the Mine Resistant models.

It was at least eight years old.

Henry didn't know what to do. He generally didn't, but everyone was looking at him then. "Call the MPs?" he said.

They checked their phones but cell phone towers didn't cover the field areas of Fort Roth.

"Someone's going to have to run back and radio this in," he said. Everyone looked to Drake.

"So now I exist, is that it? Well no. Not my responsibility, *sergeant*."

Henry turned to Koontz. "It'll have to be someone fast."

"And reliable," Koontz agreed.

"Patriotic," Prince wheezed.

"Army," Ski said.

Drake's narrowed his eyes at all of them and mouthed some slurs. He took off at a trot, Kim chasing after him. In the effort of securing the scene, Henry and the others rested in the shade side of the vehicle.

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The unintelligible radio-speak of the MPs' radio woke Henry and the rest. Koontz's head found its way onto Henry's shoulder, as if by accident. The glower she held at the ready for Henry proved this was not true. They stood and stretched. Henry waved them over the Humvee that they were already heading towards. Drake and Highsmith were trailing behind the police.

Henry always thought the MPs were the dentists of the military. They serve a purpose, he was almost certain, but no one seems to like being around them. There were two MPs who took statements from the finders, jotted them down on little notepads. They radioed in the vehicle number and waited for a response.

Highsmith, who always went off his meds during field training, looked at the vehicle like it was nostalgic bliss. He told stories of rolling into Baghdad in "one of these," his stories punctuated by grimaces and sighs. Without his pain pills Highsmith moved like he was a wrapped in casts and carrying a stack of plates, every misstep causing his eyes to register a jolt of pain.

The MPs' radios barfed out another string of words that only they could make out. Everyone straightened up.

"Uh," the Staff Sergeant said. "This vehicle isn't on any base records."

"It says Delta 6th right there," Highsmith said. "That's a Division vehicle."

“Not according to their books,” the MP said. “I am forced to conclude that this vehicle doesn’t exist.” He finished a final note on his pad with a flourish before tucking it in his breast pocket and turning back the way they’d come. The lower ranking MP followed without a word.

Highsmith carefully put his hands on his hips and his tongue in his cheek. He grimaced a few times at the retreating MPs and the vehicle.

“Fucking Army,” he said.

Chapter 10

Days before Bravo Company Deployment: 68

“So you left the vehicle there?” Barrymore asked.

“Officially, no,” Koontz said, still remembering her years of UCMJ training. “There was no vehicle to leave.”

“And this was the same vehicle that was used in the joy ride?”

“Depends on your definition of joy,” Henry said.

“And ride,” Koontz said.

“I was quite miserable the whole time,” Ski said.

First Sergeant cleared his throat and silenced the room. “Was this the vehicle you, the accused, commandeered on the night of June the 26th?”

“Yes, First Sergeant,” Henry said. First Sergeant looked pleased, like he was about to punish someone, but also—happy. The happiness caused Henry unease. “We stole it and drove it drunk as a shore leave soldier on an empty stomach, putting at risk the lives of ourselves, our fellow soldiers, and valuable military equipment. First Sergeant.”

“Reckless disregard, First Sergeant,” Ski said.

“Inexcusable lack of judgment that is inherent in every one of us that not even the fair discipline of the military couldn’t restrain or train out, First Sergeant,” Koontz said.

Barrymore looked up at First Sergeant who nodded curtly at the commanding officer. Barrymore made a note and sighed. Almost as in relief. Using peripheral glances only, the accused shared significant and worried glances.

“Let’s go through the events leading up to that night,” Barrymore said.

“It was a bad day,” Henry said.

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Days until Bravo Company deployment: 71

Henry’s bad day started at 0445 as he and Ski exited their barracks room in full battle-rattle. They wore Kevlar helmets, Removable Body Armor Vests, ballistic eye-protection, rucksacks, elbow pads that slid down to become wrist protectors, and knee pads that became shin guards. They eyed the stairs with apprehension.

“I hate range day,” Ski said.

“Shut up,” Henry said as they dragged their equipment through the hall of the barracks. They shouldered their rucks and took to the stairs like turtles, clutching the hand rails and each other to keep from tottering down the three flights.

“I really do. It’s the most miserable day of the year,” he stifled a yawn throwing off his balance. Ski grabbed Henry’s arm and the railing to steady himself. “Considering how military bases are the cheapest—most useless—tracks of land in a given state, and that gun ranges are the most geographically useless places on a military base, we are about to drive to probably the most pitiful piece of real estate in the tristate area. All to shoot at plushy green men, in an effort to improve our ability to kill people we don’t know. It really doesn’t get worse.”

They reached the ground floor out of breath. As Ski leaned against the wall, Henry looked up at the open-air flight of steps like a conquered mountain. He was in time to see a quickly descending object heading right for him. He shuffled to the side as the rucksack crashed with a thud and slumped to the side. Ski looked up at the noise, then at Henry. He held his fingers a few inches apart, disapproving.

“Holy shit, *Sarge*, you almost got crushed,” Drake said. He had come running from the parking lot, boot laces untied, Clay’s minivan leaving some rubber on its way out of Henry Drive. Drake took the stairs two at a time up to gather his equipment.

“Damn reflexes,” Henry said.

Koontz came skipping down the stairs, dressed only in her uniform. She stopped as she the obviously shaken Henry. “Did I hit anybody?” she asked, back on her way to the rucksack. She pulled out her body armor, eye protection, knee and elbow guards from the rucksack. “Army equipment,” she explained. “A lot harder to break than Army personnel.” She looked at Henry and Ski philosophically. “And a lot harder to replace.” She strapped on her protective gear. “You guys ready to sling hot rocks?”

Ski and Henry groaned, and followed Koontz to the Bravo Company area, where Humvees awaited. A tired string of soldiers filed in and out of the building, some shouldering rifles, others loading ammunition boxes into the trucks. Highsmith was seated on the picnic table, sucking on a cigarette. Range days always brought out a little glimmer of life in his eyes.

“You guys know the difference between a lie and a war story,” Highsmith asked after they signed out their rifles. They sat crossed legged before Highsmith, rifles slack in their laps. Their rifles were outfitted with red-dot sights, El-CAN scopes with toggled 1x-4x zoom, IR

laser-targeting systems, front hand-grips, and collapsible butt-stocks. They were equipped for a one-man war crime.

“A war story always starts out with ‘no shit, there I was.’” He started to laugh and instead settled into a dry hacking fit. “Well no shit, there I was...” the light left his eyes. Highsmith scarcely moved for a moment.

“Baghdad,” Ski prompted.

“No, Fallujah,” Prince said. They had heard Highsmith’s stories and were vying for their favorite.

“Kosovo,” Henry said.

“I forgot about Kosovo,” Ski said.

“Everyone did.”

Like a switch was flipped, Highsmith continued. “Kabul, Afghanistan. Spent eight weeks training all these goat-fuckers how to soldier. It was miserable. You think this outfit is pathetic, just wait ‘til you see the opposition. We’re the best military in the world in the same way Henry’s the tallest person in an elementary school. Anyway, we trained these window-lickers until they could do almost twenty push-ups and run a half-mile without wheezing and,” he slapped his hands together with a great wince “washed our hands of it.

“We sent them off with a ceremony, certificates for everyone and a plaque for the soldier of the cycle. They were happy. They hugged us, and each other. It was far too much hugging for a group of men in uniform. They insisted on a D&C demonstration with their own leadership

calling commands. Nearly 90% of them kept their balance at a right-face and we clapped like it was my daughter's dance recital."

First Sergeant ambled out of the company. Henry tensed reflexively. After his initial scans found nothing out of order, First Sergeant strode over to the picnic table as Highsmith continued.

"So we load these guys on some of their trucks. There were about 200 in all, all in these trucks as old as they were. They were singing and smiling, looking real proud. I remember shaking one guys hand as tied the back gate shut.

"There was nothing to do after that so me and the rest of the trainers lit up and watched the trucks rumble down the road. We were slightly elevated so we had a great view of the roadside bomb that blew them all up. We saw it before we heard it, you know? It's funny how slow sound is. We saw the explosion and the trucks flip. Bodies were falling out of the back like a barrel of monkeys. Then the sound. Boom."

Highsmith took a drag off his cigarette. He always paused at that point. It was enough for Henry to hear Drake curse. He turned and saw Drake carrying his armor and rucksack. Henry turned back and saw that First Sergeant's eyes had narrowed on a target. "We grabbed a few medics and drove down to check it out," Highsmith said. "They were all dead, we knew that before we left, but it was something to do."

Drake moved to go to the building and collect his rifle. First Sergeant shook his head. Highsmith continued "there was some guys there—never got over it. Kids throwing up in the sand. And it was a hell of a thing to see, body parts and guts a foot deep some places. But there's the lesson: I've seen worse—not a lot, but worse—and the thing is you can't focus on one image.

Now a severed finger will haunt you the rest of your life, but the whole image can't. It's like a meat pie, you can't look at one ingredient and be okay eating it. You have to look at the whole pie." He took a drag and let smoke pour out of his nose. "What can we do for you, First Sergeant?"

First Sergeant nodded at Drake who resignedly hung his head. He took off pooled his equipment in front of him and stood. "Sergeant Henry," First Sergeant said "your soldier was late to formation. Make sure it never happens again."

Henry hung his head resignedly, pooled his equipment in front of him and asked Ski to keep an eye on it. He motioned for Drake to follow him. Not knowing where he was going anyway, he found he was leading Drake to the volleyball pit.

"Oy vey, Sergeant, however are you going to discipline this unruly soldier?" Drake said, stretching out. "Burpees, side-straddle hop, forward-back-goes, what's the poison?"

"We're going to talk, Drake," Henry said. The first words he had spoken to Drake since Clay's memorial.

"About what?" Drake asked. Henry tilted his head to the side. "Nah. I'd rather be punished. I'm not going to be judged by you."

"Someone has to. You did a bad thing to Clay."

"I didn't drop a church on him."

"Yeah, but..."

"But nothing." Drake put his hands on his hips and spit out the side of his mouth. "I see the rest of you guys tip-toeing around, scared of deployment, that oh-my-go-I-might-die, and you

don't *do* anything. Know what I think? Too fucking bad. You signed up, you're dressed for it. Suck it up and do something one way or the other. The way I see it, I'm the only guy who's leading a life worth living." Henry had to admit, a point was made. "Screw this, I'll do push-ups."

He dropped to the sand and screamed each repetition. "ONE, SERGEANT. TWO, SERGEANT."

"Drake, stop," Henry said, seeing soldiers peering through the blinds of the barracks rooms at the spectacle.

"SIX, SERGEANT. SEVEN—"

"Goddammit, Drake! Recover!" Drake brushed his hands off and slowly went to parade rest. Henry felt dirty.

"Not bad, Sergeant. See, you fit right in. I don't know why you want to get out so badly."

"It's—"

"War. Boo. Got it. But you got all your limbs, tax-free pay for six months. Just did you do that was so bad over there?"

Henry thought for a moment. "Nothing," he said. "I did nothing." He walked off a few steps and thought about that fact.

He turned back to Drake. "Have you ever been bowling, see the ball going in the gutter and you wave your arms around and lean like it will have some sort of effect?" Drake nodded. "Well going down range, it's a lot like that. But you're on the ball instead of throwing it. The ball was thrown years ago and the bowler isn't windmilling their arms. They stopped looking and

are already marking it as a strike even though the gutter was mined and half the lane is now blown to shit.

“Being a soldier at war is like being a traffic cop in a demolition derby. It’s where terror becomes boring. The FOB was under indirect fire 3-5 times a week. Three to five times a week people I didn’t know tried to kill me. Indirectly. They haven’t killed anyone with IF for years, but they still do it. Because they’re at war and war is where attempted murder can be described as passive aggressive.”

He sat heavily on the wood, a splinter lodged in his thigh. “There’s just no logic to it. No matter how well trained and how vigilant you are, death can just come. While I was there three people were killed while ground-guiding vehicles into their garages. Honor and freedom had nothing to do with those deaths. A sniper picking off the gunner in a Humvee doesn’t strengthen the constitution. Twelve Navy SEALs going down in a helicopter didn’t amount to anything but paperwork. They just died. Because that’s what happens over there. It’s such a simple concept that a child couldn’t understand it. And everyone was used to it. Everyone went and did their duty, most did nothing or achieved nothing and waited for the ride home. That’s the scariest thing. I’ve gotten used to a lot of stupid things. I will get used to so many more. I don’t want war to be one of them.” Henry was looking at a cicada struggling over a mound of sand, his hand clutching his jaw and mouth.

Drake broke from his position of attention and sat next to Henry. He put a hand on Henry’s shoulder and wiped the remaining sand off on Henry’s back. “So you’re a pussy, huh?” he said.

Henry laughed.

*

When light broke through the canopy of evergreens, the Bravo Company convoy set off towards the rifle range. Henry sat in the passenger seat, Ski driving, and Koontz popping out of the turret. The Humvee in front was driven by Drake, Highsmith and Kim passengers. Highsmith almost picked Ski, Henry would always remember.

Ski's estimation of base layout was correct. Base land was cheap and ranges were given the land that was deemed not good for anything else than being shot into. The drive to the ranges, down old Rooster Road, was a tour of motion-sickness, blind hills broken up by fetid swampland. The Humvees struggled up the hills, diesel motors groaning and causing fear they might not make it all the way up each one. Brakes squealed like carnival rides as they went down them.

The Convoy was eight Humvees in all. Drake had his elbow sticking out of the driver's side of his. Just when Henry thought his battle with keeping his breakfast down was lost in the hills, he saw the car.

The convoy was under ordered radio silence because only First Sergeant and Highsmith knew proper radio etiquette, and so the whole ordeal happened in semi-silence. The red two-door made a move to pass the struggling convoy as it attempted another climb. Henry saw it flash by as Drake's Humvee was about to crest the hill.

There was a horn, a pickup truck coming the other way. The car cut into Drake's lane. Drake swerved to accommodate it. Dust and gravel were kicked into the windshield of Henry's Humvee as the leading vehicle left the road. It flipped once. Twice. Almost a third. It settled into

a rest on its roof. Kim vanished into a red mist. Something small flew out of the driver's side window.

Ski stopped the vehicle. Henry rushed to get out, took one step, and remembered to look at the whole pie.

*

"It was his head," Koontz said at the hearing. "Half of it, anyway. The top half of the skull still in the helmet like a bowl of soft serve." She wasn't looking at anything in particular.

"Right, yes, terrible," Barrymore said. "But..."

"This is not the purpose of this hearing," First Sergeant said. "Memorial services will be held and the dead properly honored. What happened next?"

*

"It was his head," Koontz said when Henry and Ski found her that night.

The MPs had taken statements and an ambulance came for the bodies. Koontz left with the MPs, leaving Henry and Ski to kick rocks until the order was given to turn the convoy around. Bravo was dismissed after that, or at least Henry and Ski left for the PX's liquor aisle after they turned in the Humvee. They were laden down with a warm case of beer and a plastic bottle of vodka, about to take the stairs up to their room when they heard breaking glass.

Koontz was ahead of them. Still in uniform, her legs spread eagle in the sand of the volleyball court. She had a collection of empty bottles in front of her. She reached for one, threw it at another. They clinked but didn't break. Henry and Ski silently sat and went about adding to the collection.

“Well it was an Iraq vet,” Koontz said after Ski successfully broke his third empty with his fourth. “I got that from the bumper sticker. Know where we can find an Iraq vet ‘round these parts?” She paused. “My god, it was his head.”

The pool grew. There were more shards than bottles and the plastic vodka container just caused the beer bottles to bounce in the air and land safely in the sand.

“Do you think we’re better off?” Henry asked. “As a people, with Drake gone?”

“Someone is,” Koontz said. “He was a domestic abuse waiting to happen.”

“What about Highsmith?” Ski asked.

Henry thought about it. He remembered serving under Highsmith on the last deployment. Highsmith would disappear for hours, no log, no one knew where he was. Finally, Henry asked him. The Staff Sergeant would take a civilian vehicle across the wire, dressed in civies, only a side arm on his hip. Henry asked why. Highsmith shrugged.

“I’m sure he’s happier he’s out of it,” Henry said.

“Kim?” Koontz asked.

“I never knew him to complain.”

They drank.

“It’s just not fun anymore,” Koontz concluded. With much effort she stood, swayed. Inspiration visited her. “You guys still want to get out?” She asked.

*

“I think my big question is how did you find the vehicle in that state?” Barrymore asked.

“It was me,” Henry said. “I marked the coordinates.” He looked at Koontz and Ski and confessed “I’m actually really good at land nav.”

Barrymore made the note. “So what was the message that you were sending out of that loudspeaker you found.”

*

“Good evening, Guardians of Freedom.” Koontz’s voice boomed out of the speaker. She had it secured with one arm on top of the abandoned Humvee. She nearly fell out of the turret and into Henry’s lap as Ski turned another donut in Bravo Company’s parking lot. “Be advised: this vehicle is full of drunk soldiers on a mission of mayhem. Do your part for your fellow soldiers and call the local military police today! The number is...”

The red and blue lights proved that the rest of the message was unnecessary. Ski parked the vehicle and killed the engine. Henry, after several attempts, found the door handle and opened the door. Ski didn’t move, didn’t take his hands off the wheel.

“I’m going to fight ‘em,” he said. Henry gave him a playful punch and left the vehicle.

The MPs had their hands on their side arms. Henry held up his hands. “Boy are we glad to see you guys,” he said. “I’ve had just the worst day.” The MPs asked Henry to lay on the ground, with both hands. Henry heard handcuffs clink and felt cold metal on his wrists. He was dragged to the front of the cruiser. He let his head rest on the grill.

“Name?” the figure asked, features lost in the lighting.

“Eugene Henry. Sergeant Eugene Henry.”

The MP was about to say something else but was interrupted by sounds of a struggle. Ski, in full dress uniform, was resisting. “Are you guys still pigs, pejoratively? I’d hate to insult you inappropriately,” he said as he was overpowered and stacked next to Henry.

“He’s Specialist Joseph Paderewski. He’s had a bad day too,” Henry told the MPs. A terrible squelch was heard from their stolen truck. Koontz had climbed onto the roof of the Humvee and dropped the mic of the loudspeaker. The MPs grabbed at her and she made them look like grounds keepers trying to chase a dog off a putting green.

They nabbed her and put her to rest beside Henry. “Name?” she was asked. She looked up at them. Uncertainty clouded her face, then joy.

“I don’t know!” she said to Henry, before promptly passing out of consciousness.

“She’s actually having a good day,” Henry said.

*

“Then we were put in confinement for the rest of the weekend,” Henry concluded. “We make no excuses or apologies for our actions.”

First Sergeant and Barrymore nodded. The Major made a few last notes, signed the document, and closed the folder. Henry nodded at his friends.

“Very well,” First Sergeant said. They waited without breathing. “The judgement is as follows: Specialist ... Ski, you will forfeit one week’s pay for improper dress and wear of a military uniform. Sergeants Henry and Koontz will have that reflected in their files.”

They waited.

“That is all.”

They waited, sure they hadn't heard right.

"At ease," First Sergeant said.

"What about," Henry started.

"That vehicle is not on the records of any battalion on Fort Roth. The vehicle does not exist on any official document."

"It's inadmissible," Koontz said, voice cold and dead.

First Sergeant nodded. "You can't be charged with driving a vehicle that does not exist. Dismissed."

Henry felt the ground was shrinking under him. "First Sergeant. Sir. I protest."

"I'm sure you do," First Sergeant said. Barrymore pretended the scene wasn't happening. "You three are shitbags and assholes, if I'm to tell the truth. But there's a war on, and a deployment on schedule. Battalion needs bodies to fill those deployment slots, and we've lost five in fewer weeks. The only way you're getting out is the same way they are. Dismissed."

All for nothing, Henry thought. All for nothing. It fit most of Henry's experiences.

"Oh," Barrymore said as Henry was about to close the door. "Do any of you guys know anything about computers? I have these new monitors."

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Henry left the office with an ill-defined nausea. Ski and Koontz dragged their feet behind him. The dam that held back legitimate emotion for the lost, the thought of discharge, was rudely pulled away, adding disappointment to mourning. Even Ski wasn't pleased.

The three husks took up formation. For a free ticket out, Henry couldn't recall what was said in that formation, and when the memorials were. The one thing he remembered was the Narrative.

It said: "Worried about being safe down range? New statistics compiled from the past several months show that a Fort Roth soldier is more likely to die on post than in a war zone. Which means next week is Safety Stand Down!"
