

The Broken Americans is a speculative history thriller driven by the question, "What if President Trump had successfully subverted the 2020 election?" Told through three intertwined storylines, this book analyzes what the true cost of a renewed American civil war would be, for the participants, the country, and the world. Fans of Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* will appreciate this contemporary narrative, influenced by military sci-fi classics like *Starship Troopers* and told with the grit of Anthony Swafford's *Jarhead*.

Follow the inescapable currents of America's downward spiral after falling into a civil war, later known as the Decimation War, sparked by a disastrous military coup. The story is guided by three suicidal Marine veterans shouldering the burdens of their violent indoctrinations into American freedoms as they search for a new, redeeming truth in the answers to their burning questions - What is family? What is love? For oneself? For one's military brothers? For one's country?

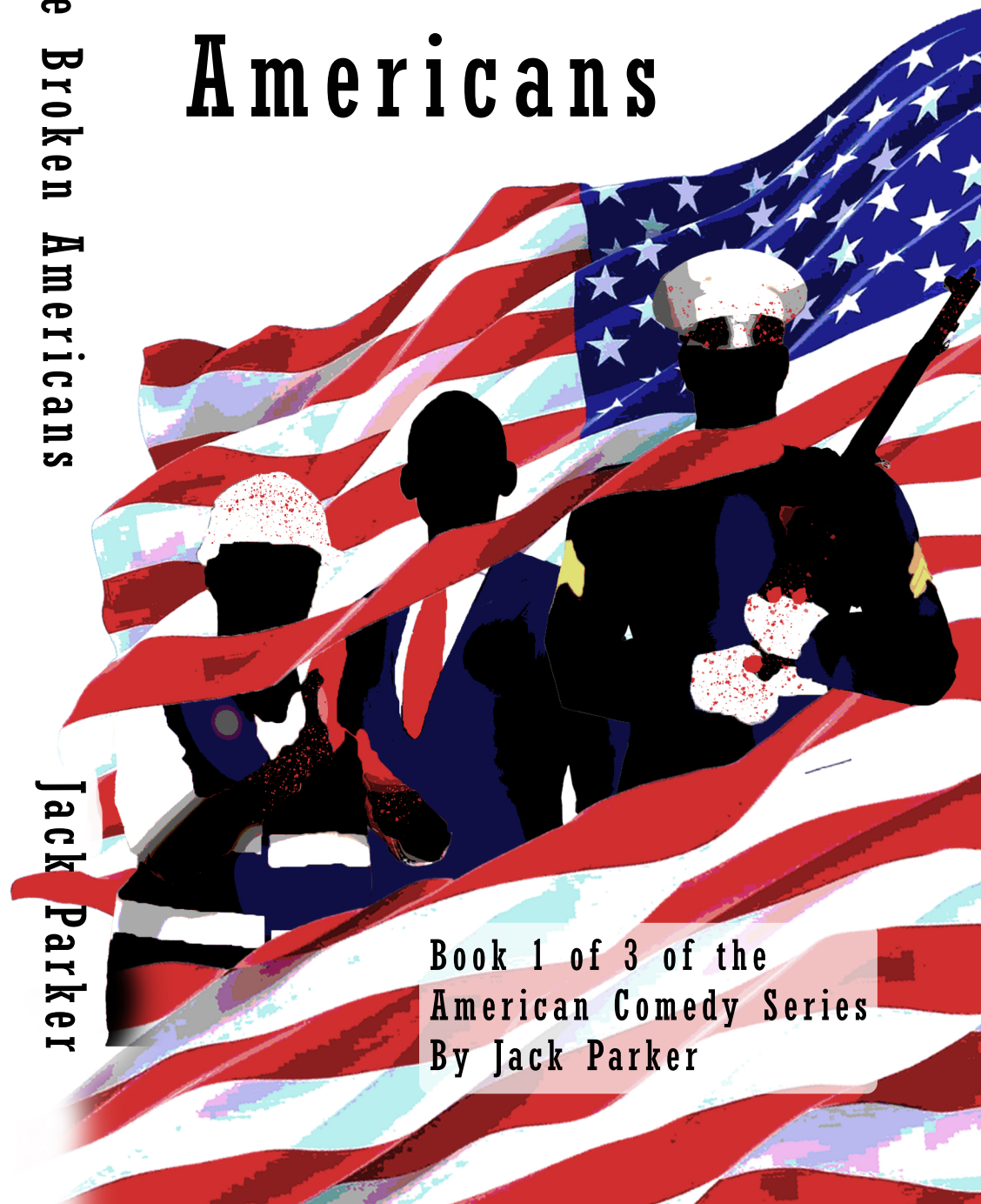
Sebastian Dent is a Marine OIF/OEF veteran that follows his estranged military brother, Aaron Morson, into a reactionary government group known as The Decimated and formed to counter internal coups. On their path to war, Sebastian begins to disassociate his brutal world into Dante's Inferno, as they descend from Arizona (Limbo) to confront his childhood demons in Mississippi (the Ninth Circle of Hell). His story is continued years after the war, where he must put aside war-time fallout with Aaron to transport their Decimated brother's corpse across a broken American landscape to his final resting place in California, marking Sebastian's ascent towards redemption as he strives to protect the next generation from the violent truths he can't seem to escape.

Follow the political entrapments of Senator Joseph Taylor, up-and-coming leader of the new American right, co-chair of the Joint Committee for American Defense and Restructuring, and an outspoken leader condemning the heinous acts of the Decimated, despite his growing understanding and reliance on the Decimated's unprecedented domestic martial influences as the new National Congress navigates treacherous unknowns during a Texan secession set to upset America's precarious peace and reignite a civil strife that has already cost millions of American lives.

The Broken Americans

Jack Parker

The Broken Americans



Book 1 of 3 of the
American Comedy Series
By Jack Parker

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“That is just like man! They are all the same: though fully aware in advance of all the evil aspects of a deed, they aid and abet and even encourage it, seeing the impossibility of any other expedient – and then they wash their hands of the whole affair and turn away with indignation from him who has had the courage to take the whole burden of responsibility upon himself. They are all alike, even the best-natured, the wisest...”

- Grigory Alexandrovich Pechorin, A Hero of Our Time

Chapter 1

April 4, 1997

“Mom, please!” Sebastian sat in the back seat of the car pleading with his mother. “But I hit two doubles mom!” The tears streamed down his face as he desperately searched for the correct combination of words that would deliver him from his pending sentence.

“I know, I saw them, honey.” His mother refused to turn her head and acknowledge the pain behind her. Her voice quivered, but her face remained empty, resigned to her perceived helplessness.

Sebastian sought a crack in her empty facade. He didn’t quite have the words to describe it, but he had always understood his mother to be some sort of broken robot, incapable of thought without his father’s input; but surely there was a fragment of a human being left in there with the compassion to help him. He found no perceived weakness in her vacant expression, at least not in the profile exposed to him.

Sebastian searched across the crowded parking lot to gauge his remaining time and found his father at the entrance of the sports complex talking to John Paul’s dad. He didn’t know why they were talking, but he couldn’t be bothered about that when it was buying him precious moments to hammer out his plea bargain.

“Mom, please! I slid and caught the ball from the outfield and got the runner out at home! Did he see me make that play?!” The grass stains and red clay covering Sebastian’s little-league uniform verified his story and testified to his effort.

“Yes, honey, he saw you. He was very proud.” Her face was unwavering.

“Then why am I being punished?!” He sobbed, no longer able to control his mounting frustration and anger.

“Quiet! Your father’s coming!” The fear in her voice pierced straight through Sebastian’s senses, instantly triggering his reptilian brain. The tears instantaneously ceased as he frantically scraped at his eyes trying to scrub away any evidence of their existence. He instinctually sat up as straight as he could and splayed out his wiry limbs.

The car locks snapped open from his father’s key remote.

“Mom, please.” Sebastian whispered one last dubious plea.

His father opened the door to absolute silence and took his seat. He turned on the car and the radio’s news program resumed playing. The hosts’ genial voices offered a protective substitute for the car ride home, but his dad wasn’t going to allow that tonight. He turned off the radio and looked at Sebastian staring back at him in the rearview mirror.

“Well, I counted seven balls and five strikes tonight. That’s twelve whippings according to our agreement, correct?”

“Yes.” Sebastian matched his father’s gaze. The hatred seeped out of every available orifice. His gaze broke when he saw the swollen red rings around his eyes and fixated on the evidence glaring back at him. He hated that his anger always required tears. He wanted nothing more than to develop his mother’s ability to turn off her tears and withhold that satisfaction from his father, but that would not happen tonight. The irritated red flesh was a loud proclamation of his anger, his fear, his beliefs; and his father would savor this power. Sebastian would have to accept that flaw for now as he felt the warm tingle wash across his face and let the adrenaline’s addictive surge engulf him, reassuring him with the pending power that would soon be his.

“You got some hits tonight, though. You see the improvement that comes when you actually listen and use my advice?”

“Yeah, *I hit* two doubles.” Sebastian defiantly muttered.

“You hit two doubles when you used *my* swinging technique.”

Sebastian’s eyes matched his father’s gaze. There was no point in further protesting. His father would just continue to twist the conversation and extract further torment from him. Sebastian wouldn’t allow him a complete victory, though. He steadied his gaze into the mirror and let his father witness the violence that was silently taking place in his mind. Their standoff was broken when his mother turned on the radio and resumed staring out her window. Sebastian’s stare spewed his hatred into the back of her head as she implicitly endorsed her husband’s violence by cowering in her innocence.

They pulled out of the sports complex’s parking lot and left onto Hewes Avenue. Sebastian knew every turn and building on this drive down Hewes Avenue and onto Railroad Street to their house and could use them to tell you exactly how much time was left on their twelve-minute journey. After approximately one and a quarter miles, they approached the Pass Road intersection where the Mitsubishi dealership sat. Sebastian held his breath; if they missed this light, it was going to add another three minutes to this unbearable kangaroo court and his father’s bullshit prosecutions.

“Make it, make it, make it, make it”, Sebastian silently urged as they drew nearer to the light that had remained green for a concerning amount of time already. If they could make it past the start of the car lot before it turned yellow, then he knew they’d make it.

Sebastian felt the tension in his muscles release as they passed the lot while the light remained a steady green. All he’d have to do now was take his punishment and he could return to his room.

Suddenly, Sebastian felt the deceleration and the stomach churning that came with it. Why was he slowing down? Make the fucking light! Sebastian prepared himself for the incoming assault by revisiting the fantasy of smashing his dad's face in with his bare hands. Blood sprayed and bones caved to his furious fists as he pummeled a face that would soon be his own. His stomach churned in synch with the phantom lurch that indicated the car's velocity had reached zero, while the car behind let out an angry honk as they both sat, waiting for the light to turn from yellow to red.

Sebastian preempted the aggression by waiting for his dad in the mirror with his belligerent stare.

His dad reached out and turned the radio off. "So, I was talking with Jerry Smith after the game and he said that John Paul's all-star league is about to start their summer season, and they need another player on their roster. I convinced him to offer you the spot since your batting improved so much."

"John Paul's two years older than me. I don't have to play in that league." Sebastian returned his volley; confident he was too young to be forced to endure this shitty 'sport' for another three months.

"That's not a problem. They already got a waiver for Jacob Martins."

"Jacob was held back a grade. He's a year older than me."

"JERRY SAID HE COULD CLEAR YOU TO PLAY." The rage stoked in his father's voice as Sebastian resisted his advances.

The adrenaline had already kicked in and hit its sweet spot, making Sebastian impervious to the threat of his father's rage. "I don't want to play on that team. I want to play with Joe this summer." Sebastian was elated that there were no tears in his stand. Satisfied, his gaze left the mirror as he channeled all

available energy into changing the light ahead through sheer will and belief.

“Well, you can play with your friend Jacob now. And you can make friends with the older kids now, too.” His mom chimed in to take the edge off and keep tensions from boiling over. She had a habit of undermining his defiance in order to subdue his father’s rage.

Sebastian reached down and began feeling for the nickel-sized welts across his thighs and midsection that had been left by Jacob and his friends the week before. He didn’t want to accept the invitation to Jacob’s house because he knew Jacob wasn’t a friend but had begrudgingly accepted the singular ‘choice’ presented by his parents and the day played out as he had expected.

Jacob had convinced the group to play a game called ‘Rabbit Hill’, where several players would stand on the raised porch and shoot paintball guns out at a single player running across the yard about eighty meters away. Sebastian had seen his fate and refused to play, so Jacob had a couple of other players do a few practice runs with the air valves set to the lowest setting to show it was safe while Sebastian looked unconvinced. After fifteen or so minutes of pestering and belittling, Sebastian decided he would take his run just to take the other kids’ attention off of him.

He made his way down the stairs and across the yard to the starting point, each step fully aware of his impending fate. He stopped behind the protective row of pine trees and waited for his cue.

“Ready?” Jacob shouted across the yard. Sebastian thought he heard snickers behind it, but was too far away to verify his paranoia.

“Yeah.”

“OK...1...2...3...GO!”

Sebastian sprinted across the yard, his lanky legs taking long, awkward strides like a juvenile giraffe that hadn't quite fully mastered running yet. He heard the “ffft, ffft, ffft” as the paintballs whizzed past him. A couple even found their mark but lacked the force to explode on impact and limply bounced off of him instead. He let out a victorious sigh of relief after finding cover behind the shed on the other side of the yard. He turned around, rejuvenated and excited about completing the return run across the yard.

“1....2....3...GO!”

The fluidity of Sebastian's stride improved, bolstered by the confidence of the previous run, and he felt himself gliding across the yard as his feet barely touched the grass beneath him. ffft....ffft...ffft – Even the regularity and intensity of the paintballs' barrage seemed to have diminished and been thwarted by this new, swift stride. He made it to the other side and back to the safety of the trees. He felt his heart rate increase as he drew deep breaths of air to fuel his flight. His confidence grew as he imagined himself making the next two runs without a single paintball touching him.

“Ok ready?” Jacob's voice wasn't distant like it had carried from the porch.

“One...” Why were there whispers behind him?

“Two...” There were definitely muffled snickers behind him.

“THREE! GO!”

Upon hearing their cue, Sebastian's tensed muscles unraveled and unleashed their stored energy, propelling him to his goal. The first step sprung off the grass, the second planted and dug in to add force to his movement, the third propelled him out from behind his cover. Fully committed, Sebastian burst out

into the open, completely exposed to the ambush that had been set for him.

During Sebastian's first run, Jacob had led the others to a secret stash of paintballs in the garage's deep freezer and then had them sneak up behind Sebastian using the tree line for concealment. They'd set their trap not even twenty feet away from him and were now unloading their hardened ordnance against his undeveloped body. He froze in his trap as hundreds of angry little bites snapped across his skin. His brain screamed "RUN!" but his legs refused to conspire and endanger him further. All he could do was collapse into a ball and use his bony limbs to try and protect the even more vulnerable body. The charged balls continued in their unrelenting barrage, accompanied by uncontrollable laughter. His anger took over and numbed the physical pain but exacted its price. He felt the tears streaming down his face as the sobbing took over without resistance. Sebastian felt the torrent let up as each shooter exhausted their ammo supply until, eventually, there were no more shots left to take.

Silence had stealthily crept in to replace the violent swishes of paintballs and malicious laughter until eventually there was nothing except for Sebastian's soft sobbing and the distant bird calls from the nearby woods. Sebastian felt the eyes of the other children staring at him while his tears exposed his vulnerability. He felt the anger well up, but he wasn't angry at the other kids. He was furious with his tears. He was angry that they told the other kids they'd hurt him when he could feel no physical pain in that moment, a betrayal of what he truly felt inside. He felt anger, rage, and violence; but all they saw was his weakness.

In reality, those tears were his most faithful expression. They expressed his exhaustion; his exhaustion at having to face everything by himself; his exhaustion of learning everything about life by himself without anyone to teach him; his

exhaustion of being forced to abandon those hard-earned lessons in self-preservation in order to appease social norms designed to take from him and give to others; he was tired of being alone.

Eventually, the muted jeering stopped as each child had their fill. Sebastian could do nothing to improve his situation. He had already given them everything they wanted. The sobs continued in repressed heaves as Sebastian stood up and made his way back to the house. The other kids sat in his way as he tried to avoid their malevolent stares and push his way past them. Only one face showed remorse. Peter gaped in horror as he witnessed the misery he had unleashed onto this being he had considered a friend. Sebastian trudged on and made his way to the front porch where he collapsed into a swinging white wicker bench hung from the rafters. He waited there for another two hours for his mom's scheduled arrival, softly comforted by the sobs' validating touch.

Before his mom arrived, Jacob's parents had come home and pieced together some of what their little sociopath had done and were waiting on the front porch with Sebastian. Jacob's mom escorted him to the passenger side of his mom's minivan while Jacob's dad went to explain Jacob's version of what had happened to his mother.

"Hey, Chastity, so it looks worse than it actually is. Turns out the boys got a little rough while playing paintball and teamed up on Sebastian. The boys know better than to play like that and they'll be dealt with."

"Oh ok. Thanks for the explanation, Richard. Yeah, Sebastian can get worked up, so we better get him home and cleaned up." His mom quickly changed the subject and carried on the conversation with seemingly genuine joviality, unaffected by her child sitting next to her with hundreds of inflamed welts across his body. Sebastian stewed in his mother's indifference,

occupying himself by rubbing the rain-soaked soil he had tracked onto her impeccable floor mats into a random series of circles with his toes. Finally, they left after his mother had adequately fulfilled her social obligations.

"Well honey, I'm sorry that happened. Are you ok?"

"I'm fine." The lie continued poisoning his soul.

"Here's some baby wipes for your face. Let's not tell your father, ok?"

"Yeah."

Nothing else needed to be said. Both were fully aware of what his mother considered to be the real threat. Now Sebastian sat there feeling the raised circular ridges around his bruises reflecting on how that was her only solace. Don't tell your father. That was all he got to heal his shattered ego.

His mother's warning resonated in his mind as Sebastian glared back at her before quickly averting her gaze, unwilling to acknowledge her child sacrifice. Sebastian didn't want to spend the next three months playing on a baseball team with kids that already picked on him. He hated everything about the stupid game. Now he was going to be the worst player in a league with kids 2-3 years older than him and all of the older kids on his team were going to hate him even more for it; and Jacob's psychopathic deviations were sure to help them figure out new and creative ways to torture him. That was the bearable part.

The most dreadful aspect would be the weekends trapped in the car, being persecuted by his father for every little mistake. And there would be no buffering distractions from his older siblings this year. Every missed catch, every missed swing would have to be accounted for. Sebastian had planned on spending most of his fifth-grade summer safely at his friend Joe's house, but now he felt that safety dissipate as he foresaw his days replaced with nothing but him and his father practicing in an

empty infield. He felt the terror settle deep into his being as the realization slowly dawned on him. He winced at the thought of his father's 80 mph fastballs whizzing at his unprotected head. Every step outside of the box, involuntary bracing, or any attempt to shield himself from the projectiles would only enrage his father further and prompt him to throw them even harder and more accurately at his face. Sebastian thought about his father's screaming face bearing down on him as he fought off the heat exhaustion brought on for hours under the sweltering Mississippi sun. He consoled himself with the intrusive thoughts; maybe he'd finally snap and take that aluminum bat to his father's skull.

"Well, it'll improve your entire game to step up and compete with the older kids. We still have a month to decide, so we'll just keep working on your swing in the meantime." His dad turned the radio back on and took his cue to begin crossing Pass Road.

The conversation was over. Sebastian didn't bother engaging in the futility of a protest. He just needed to make it through his punishment and into his room without further losses. He hated how they presented his father's decisions as choices. The longer he held out, the more his mother would plead with him and the more his father would bully him. Every weekend he said 'no' would be another weekend spent absorbing his father's fastballs and rage. He hated this insane fantasy forced upon him without any reprieve. If he purposefully played worse, that would just increase the violence and reinforce his father's argument that he should play to improve. If he continued batting above .600 and making game-stopping plays on the field, then it would only encourage his father to continue forcing his delusions onto Sebastian.

Now, on their Hewes Avenue route between Pass Road and Railroad Street there were mostly redlined neighborhoods. Sebastian didn't know that was what they were called, but he

recognized them when they passed through them. He understood what his father's apish "ooh-ooh" and "ahh-ahh's" meant whenever they passed into them and called them by their understood names. Hood. Ghetto. Less than. Undeserving. Sebastian searched for his favorite landmark on the drive - Holder's Tavern on 28th Street. Sebastian could smell the slow-roasted barbeque drawing the crowd and excitedly watched in anticipation as the cars began packing onto the shoulder, displaced from the overflow gravel lot used by the nearby Baptist Church on Sundays.

Just once could they get a flat tire here? Sebastian gleefully sent his wish into the universe again. He understood they didn't belong, but he craved for the day where his enraged father would have to cower and cuckold from any fight he provoked from them, or even better, have to ask one of them for help. They were rarely outside of his pathetic little empire, and there were few times when Sebastian got to see his father shrink down into his truest avatar, but he cherished every moment they existed, inside and outside his mind. Surely, everyone at the cookout would eventually be unilaterally and unjustly punished, but for one brief moment in existence, all could take their fill of retribution. For now, Sebastian would just have to savor the fear wafting in heavenly notes of bitter and salt as the car decelerated to a respectful 5 mph below the speed limit.

"Dooo...dooo....doooo....just swing the bat!" The Amway motivational tape repeated its nonsensical lesson, simultaneously reaffirming his father's coaching style and maintaining their indoctrination in the pyramid scheme.

His parents had become obsessed with Amway and its mystical abilities to create passive income out of nothing. It wasn't enough that they were beyond well off with a millionaire's inheritance from the fraternal estate passed on before Sebastian had even been conceived; or that his father's doctor salary alone was five times the national average household

income. No. They had to have passive income, constantly regenerating their self-worth and validating their existence without any effort or sacrifice in exchange.

“Doo....dooo....dooo...swing the bat!” The tape’s monotonous repetitions crashed against Sebastian’s hardened psyche as they pulled into the driveway. He felt disappointment as the engine shut off and with it, any chances for his fantasies to materialize that night.

He waited patiently as his father struggled with the front door locks and smiled as he grew agitated by the dead bolt thwarting him.

“Why won’t this God damned door open!?”

Finally, the simple mechanism gave to his irritated shaking and the heavy, oaken door gave way to a darkened entrance. Sebastian marched into the darkness. He was determined not to give his father the satisfaction of forcing him to take his punishment. Onward he pushed through the dining room, pantry, and kitchen as the delayed lights flickered on behind him until he reached the choice to take the stairs up to his room or to go forward into the house’s monstrous master suite where his punishment awaited him. Unwavering, he marched against his animal instinct to avoid pain.

“You’re going to my closet!” His father’s voice carried from around the hallway corner.

Sebastian’s blood boiled at being cheated out of his victory. He didn’t respond, just continued down his path. He arrived at the back of his father’s closet and began preparing his altar. He reached under a rack of hanging pants and pulled out a modest wooden bench used to aid with dressing and undressing and dragged it out to the middle of the closet and under a tapestry made up of dozens of hanging belts.

“Well, pick your belt.” The proximity of his father’s voice startled Sebastian, but not enough for him to look back and allow his father to register fear. The psychological terror that came from having your victim choose the weapon to be used against them made this by far the most gratifying part of the punishment, and Sebastian despised his hesitation. He had already chosen his belt before he had even left the dugout to deny his father’s satisfaction, but doubt replaced surety when he was faced with all the consequences of the pending decision.

Every nuance of black and brown was represented in his tormentor’s tool kit. There were thick, double-hided belts and hide-piercingly thin-shaved belts. There were belts taken from cow, calf, alligator, and ostrich hides. The two cloth choices were off limits. One would think that the skinny belts would be the obvious choice because they didn’t have enough mass to build a devastating momentum, but with minimal air resistance, these were the ones that dug in and bit the deepest, often leaving tender red lacerations on Sebastian’s seat days after his punishment. The thick ones had the weight to generate a forceful strike, but also had an increased surface area to distribute it across and nullify much of the threat. These were the easiest ones to endure.

Sebastian briefly held out one of the most devastating belts and fondled its large metal cowboy buckle hanging from the end. He thought back to the last and only time he had chosen it, a day he had been exceptionally frustrated with his trumped-up charges. Without thought, he ripped it from its perch and thrust it, buckle-dangling, into his father’s expectant hand with a fearlessness that was sure to undermine his authority. His father reacted by using the belt just as Sebastian had dared him to. He swung the belt around in a pendulous arch and let the centrifugal torque amplify the buckle’s destructive power. Over and over again, Sebastian felt the metal dig into his hip bones

and ribs as he tried to wriggle out from under the hand that pinned him down.

Sebastian briefly considered choosing that giant buckle again, as a way to retroactively nullify some of the satisfaction that came from his hesitation. He decided against it though, reminding himself that his father's time would come. He reached back and pulled out his original choice from the rattling pit.

He handed his selection to his executioner, pulled down his pants and underwear, and assumed his practiced position. He repeated his mantra as the belt exacted its sacrifice.

Everything is temporary. Pain is temporary. Family is temporary.

Sebastian grew painfully aware of the adrenaline's hangover as the first crimson band seeped out and its blood-stained fangs registered its familiar venom in his depleted mind.

Chapter 2

March 30, 2018

A steady stream of white smoke poured from the exhaust of Sebastian Dent's 1976 W200 Club Cab Power Wagon as he pulled into the old filling station. The body rattled as the 400 big block shuttered off and the door creaked as he stepped out. He slammed the door but instantly knew he had failed to close it when he heard the dull thud and the door defiantly creak open. "Jeee-Sus!" He swung it open and slammed it again, this time hearing the confirming click.

There was a heavy nip in the air from the delinquent snowbanks that the rising spring sun had failed to completely melt as Sebastian approached the old filling station that had been restored and converted into an unassuming diner. As he stepped inside, he was met with a welcome waft of warm air and strong coffee providing an element of coziness to combat the wet March morning.

"Hey, Sebastian! Over here!"

Sebastian looked over to his right and saw Alex excitedly waving him down from a booth tucked away in the corner. He wore a joyous smile that Sebastian couldn't help but emulate. Sebastian struck out a calloused hand for a greeting, but it was pushed away by Alex's oversized paw.

"Dude, I haven't seen you in years! You aren't getting away with that today!" Alex wrapped him up in a bear hug. "How are you? You look a little rough around the edges!"

Sebastian pried himself away from Alex's uncomfortable embrace. "It's good to see you, too. Yeah, I'm good; just finished my shift so just a little tired."

"Well, I'm glad we could link up on such short notice! I got Aaron here."

Sebastian poked his head around the partition wall and found Aaron brooding; Aaron held out an indifferent hand for Sebastian to shake.

“Hey Sebastian.”

“Hey Aaron, sorry to hear about your divorce.”

“Hmmmph.” Aaron sulked back to his corner while Sebastian shot Alex a concerned look.

“Oh, he’s been a grumpy Gus the whole trip, but we’re going to keep him surrounded with people who love him and help him out of that hole, eventually.”

“Fuck off, Alex.”

Alex chuckled, “He’s not much for conversating right now, so it looks like it’ll just be me and you. What’s new with you? I thought you were down in the Permian Basin?”

“Nah, they moved me up here a few months ago. Had a safety incident and got run off.”

“Safety incident?” Alex layered his pointed question with knowing concern.

“Nah, it wasn’t that big of a deal. They were kicking off a project up by Farmington and they were planning on moving me up here anyways because I was the only one that had steered in the Chaco slope before. I was having some friction with the company man, so they just used it as an excuse to move me up here.”

“What did I tell you? You stick around long enough and acquire enough experience, and you can start getting better jobs.”

Sebastian demurred. “Not really. I’ll just get laid off at the next downturn and remain unemployed just long enough for them to start me back at the bottom on the next upswing.” Sebastian sighed. “It’s such a bullshit career cycle.”

“Ok, so just quit oil and gas then and transfer your skills to a different industry.”

Sebastian hesitated before giving a resigned sigh. “Maybe we should change the subject. I haven’t seen y’all in such a long time and I don’t want to be here bitching nonstop.”

“Sebastian, stop. You’re just in your head and down on yourself right now because things aren’t working out how you want them to. Send me your resume and I’ll help you work on it.”

“No. You don’t get it, Alex. You went to work in the Bakken when oil was \$120/barrel. You had an incomplete performing arts degree and were making six figures as a worm. Then, just as the industry started imploding, you got to jump ship to a perfectly timed security detail that was tailor-made for your skillset and doubled your salary.” Sebastian shook his head and averted his shameful gaze to the menu. “Not that I believe you don’t deserve it. I think you’d be overqualified and underpaid for any job you took, but please have a little perspective. I have an industry-specific STEM degree, and I’m billing three hundred days a year to the rig, and I’m still only bringing in seventy-five K a year.”

“Oh, shut the fuck up Sebastian!” Aaron struck out from his self-containment. “Oh boohoo, I hate my job! Life sucks! Did your wife just pick up and leave out of the blue?! Did your world just shatter around you without warning?! No?! Then shut the fuck up!”

“Ok, Aaron, I think you should go out to the truck and get back to sleep. I’ll order your food to go, and we’ll get going in a bit.”

Aaron stomped off at Alex’s orders.

Sebastian was taken aback. He didn’t know Aaron was capable of lashing out like that. Not that he felt like he truly knew Aaron, despite Aaron having already freely endowed the highest title of ‘Brother’ onto Sebastian. He really only felt like

he was a friendly acquaintance that got the privilege of coming into Aaron's orbit every now and then when Alex would bring him around to visit Sebastian at their old barracks. Even when providence had sent the three of them to the same university, Sebastian could always sense an uneasy distance between himself and their group, but always appreciated it when Alex would invite him to soak in their joyous world where the two of them were always smiling and holding their beautiful fiancées.

"Sorry about that. Shit's got him in such an incoherent haze that I can't tell if he's on uppers or downers or if the heartbreak's just forced his brain to stop manufacturing any of the good chemicals, but he's not himself right now."

"I know. It's just a little unexpected. I've never seen him like that." Despite the harsh words, Sebastian couldn't find any maliciousness in Aaron's outburst; just another deeply wounded soul in need of rest. "So, what the fuck happened?"

"Not a clue. I've been trying to piece it together, but I can't get much out of him right now. Seems like Delilah just woke up one day and decided the marriage was over, though."

"Seriously? No warning? No nothing? Everything seemed so perfect from the outside."

Sebastian shook his head as he tried to process the incompatible information. How could someone fall out of love with Aaron? Besides Alex, Aaron was one of the most ideal men Sebastian had ever met. And the way he freely and wholeheartedly loved Alex and Delilah was the total embodiment of that elusive dream Sebastian had never quite figured out how to define as he searched for his own version. But if a woman could fall out of love with someone like Aaron, just like that, then what hope could Sebastian possibly have for finding something whole and complete for himself?

“Honestly, I’m still just as in the dark as you. He’d convinced her to try and work it out for a couple of weeks, but she’d already made her decision. She actually called me up to move him out to Phoenix since he didn’t want to leave, but when I got there, she refused to talk to me.”

“That’s just bizarre, dude. You worried about him being a suicide risk?”

“Yeah of course, but Sarah’s just got a job offer up in San Francisco and the wheels are already in motion. My hands are kind of tied right now. I told him to stay with us but he just kept saying he’d probably off himself anyways if he had to be around us as a happy couple.”

“Hmmm, I mean that’s kind of fucked up, but I get it. So, what are you going to do with him?”

“Gonna spend a week getting him settled in in Phoenix and take off. His sister Katrina’s out there too, so at least he’ll have her around to keep an eye on him.”

“I didn’t know she was out there. What’s she up to?”

“Oh, she’s still figuring her shit out.”

“Well, at least he’ll have some family around to keep an eye on him.”

Alex’s brow furrowed. “Hmm yeah. Just wish we could get him around someone a little more responsible. He’s going to...” Before Alex could finish his thought, the waitress interrupted to take their orders.

“Hey sweetie, good to see you again! How’s the rigs?”

“Hey Melanie,” Sebastian grinned, “It’s still just an endless buffet of manmeat out there. Just ask and I’ll get you out there to find a husband.”

The seasoned townie replied to the familiar banter with a homely laugh. "I told you! They couldn't handle my shit!"

"All right, well the offer still stands. I'll keep working on wearing you down for myself in the meantime."

"Oh, you young guys are so cute when y'all're trying to bite off more 'an you can chew. Maybe if your handsome friend here helped you out, you'd be able to get somewhere."

Sebastian shot a playfully excited look to Alex.

Alex held up his left hand to show his ring. "Sorry, taken."

Sebastian shook his head while he put on a mischievous grin. "He never supports my dreams."

Melanie let out another boisterous laugh. "You just may get there one of these days, sweetie. What'll you have?"

"Oh, I think you know" Sebastian rarely strayed from the diner's main attraction, "I'll take a slice of heaven with two eggs over easy and a coffee." Easily the best breakfast in all of Colorado, the 'slice of heaven' was a thick-cut slice of potato bread dipped in an eggy batter and pan-fried, then drowned in a roasted green chile and sausage gravy and topped in a white cheddar cream sauce.

"And for you, handsome?"

"I'll try your brisket and grits. Coffee and water to drink. And can I put in a to-go order for a French-toast breakfast with sausage links?"

"You got it." Melanie turned to relay their order to the kitchen and revealed a surprisingly shapely ass to Alex as she left.

"I can never tell if you're being serious with these ones that've been put out to pasture."

Sebastian grinned. "You know me and my mommy issues. Besides, not too many options on the rigs."

“So, get out of here, then! Go take an environmental job and find yourself a nice granola girl.”

Sebastian sighed at Alex’s unencumbered optimism. “It’s not that easy. I have no clue what girls are looking for, but it isn’t me; and I don’t think straddling the poverty line is going to help me stand out.”

“What I’m saying is you hate this job and it’s already not helping with any of your extracurriculars, so why don’t you just leave and do something that you actually care about? What about that farm you were talking about starting with your brother?”

Sebastian’s face emptied. “It’s been a while since we’ve caught up, huh?”

Melanie dropped off their drinks before shuffling off to seat the retiree couple at the door.

“What happened?”

Sebastian pulled out two sweeteners and flicked them before ripping the tops and dumping them in with a healthy serving of creamer. “I got in another fight with my dad and finally realized I couldn’t tolerate him anymore. I tried to just cut him out but he just kept using my mom as a proxy to get to me, so I cut her out too. That’s when they started turning Levi against me, so I’ve basically just given up on the entire family.”

“That’s actually a relief to hear, Sebastian.” Alex took a sip of his water as he thought about his delicate phrasing, “I didn’t want to say anything because it’s your family and it wasn’t really my place to say, but you’d get so worked up and stressed out every time you’d have to talk to them on the phone. They weren’t great for you.”

Sebastian opened his sorrowful smile. “You were never very subtle about it, but yeah, you were right. I think I held on for so

long because I had a lifetime of mindfucks to unravel and I was scared of being on my own. I'm terrified of what they're going to do to Levi now, though."

Alex sucked in a quick breath between his teeth. "Yeah, that's a tough one, but not much you can do about it until you get yourself sorted."

Sebastian smiled a little deeper as he stared into his coffee. "Yeah, the little Alex on my shoulder's been slowly wearing me down. I finally broke down and found a therapist down in Farmington that I've been going to for a couple of months now."

"Dude, that's awesome! Do you think it's helping?"

"I don't know. I seem to be doing most of the talking and she won't really offer any useful advice."

"Are you guys just talking about your family stuff, though?"

"Yeah, it's mostly family stuff. I've talked about the career stuff with her, but she's pretty much useless there; just keeps talking about her own decision to become a therapist after her kids moved away to college."

"Oh, so this is a private therapist? Have you tried the ones at the VA?"

"Nah, the closest VA facilities are in Albuquerque and it's hard enough fitting the weekly drive to Farmington into my fluctuating rig schedule."

"Well, that may be one more reason for you to think about getting out of the oil fields. Don't get me wrong, I think therapy of any kind will be beneficial for you, but the VA's mental health stuff is on a whole other level. And they deal with a lot of complex traumas like combat-induced PTSD that I'm not sure a private therapist is equipped to handle unless they deal with a lot of veterans."

Sebastian followed his natural inclination to resist Alex's level-headed logic. "Mmm, I don't know. I think most of my stuff is based around my family and childhood."

"Oh yeah, your parents definitely did a number on you, but I also think the Marine Corps made those traumas a lot more complicated for you. Aaron was saying some of the same shit you are, but I was able to convince him to go a few years ago, and he agreed the military had fucked his shit up a lot more than he had originally given them credit for. And the difference it made in him was like night and day."

"Yeah, but y'all were snipers camping out behind enemy lines for weeks at a time without support." Sebastian lowered his eyes to escape into the coffee's ochre hues. "I was just a machine-gunner."

"Sebastian," Alex's voice was stern and reprimanding as he lowered his face to retrieve his friend. "You were on a combat deployment as a part of the first American unit to ever enter the Helmand River Valley. And something happened to you after I left for the sniper platoon. It's like you stopped trying to be happy and you're just going through the motions to survive. And it's so frustrating because you won't talk to any of us about it."

"I don't know, maybe you're right, but I still think it's mostly childhood stuff and not the VA's problem."

"Then they shouldn't have been recruiting you if you were already so fucked up! It's like Aaron's therapist used to tell him – the military doesn't recruit happy people; especially not for combat roles like snipers and infantry."

Sebastian sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right." There was no point in arguing when Alex had an answer to everything.

“Of course, I’m right! Now what are we going to do to get you out of here and onto the next step? You give up on the farm completely?”

Sebastian’s smile sank. “Yeah. That was mostly Levi’s dream. Not really much of a point to it if he’s not going to be involved.”

“Ok. You got anything else that you’re interested in working towards?”

Sebastian’s face softened. It was hard to stay withdrawn when Alex cared so much. “Well, it’s kind of interesting that you’re moving Aaron out to Phoenix right now, because I’ve been looking at going back to grad school at the University of Arizona and Tucson’s only like an hour and a half away from Phoenix.”

“Dude, that would be awesome if we got you out in Arizona! Have you applied yet?”

“The thing is, it’s a professional master’s, so you’re expected to secure your own funding. I had about seventy thousand saved towards the farm that I could use, but I just don’t know if I want to risk putting all of that money into furthering my education towards a career that hasn’t exactly panned out.”

“Would it help you move out of oil and gas and into something you like better?”

“Yeah, I could either do an environmental focus or a mining focus.”

“Then you should do it.”

“I don’t know man. That’s a pretty steep price tag.”

Alex mulled the information over for a few seconds. “We’ll use your G.I. Bill. I know you still got a few weeks left on it.”

“Yeah, but they won’t let you reuse it if you already used it to get a full undergrad degree. I already looked into it.”

“Yeah, so convert it to Chapter 33. As long as you can prove that your combat injuries are preventing you from performing your current role, you can convert it, and it’ll pay for your housing and tuition and everything just like the first time you used it, except with more perks.”

“I don’t have any documented combat injuries.”

“What are you talking about? You were shot!”

Sebastian held up his hand to show the minor scar. “It was a ricochet. A dog leapt out at Recruit, and he let off a burst into the wall. We didn’t document it so the dumbass wouldn’t get written up.”

Alex stared in disbelief at Sebastian’s blank face. “Ok what about your knees and your back? Didn’t those give out by our second deployment?”

“They weren’t documented because I would’ve been sent home when the platoon had already lost enough guys to be combat ineffective.”

“What’s your disability rating at, Sebastian? What are you rated for?”

“Twenty percent for some scars and tinnitus.”

“What!? Why haven’t you challenged that? Have you even tried to get screened for PTSD? Weren’t you in Singh’s convoy that got blown up? Have you gotten screened for TBI’s? What about your hemorrhoids? Still shitting your brains out all of the time? You don’t think that has anything to do with shitting MRE bricks every day for two deployments? You need to get on this before your shit gets any worse, because they’ll just start saying these injuries aren’t related to your enlistment.”

“Yeah, but that’ll probably up my disability rating and I don’t feel comfortable about that. Not when there’s guys like Sanchez missing their legs and only getting like sixty percent.”

“Sanchez didn’t get a high enough rating either! You know he offered himself a couple of years ago, right? And you said he was only at sixty percent?! So that’s like a thousand dollars a month for what? Six years? You think Sanchez got a fair deal there? Seventy-two thousand for both of his legs?”

“No, not really.” Sebastian sheepishly returned his gaze to his coffee. “I just feel like my stuff’s all just a part of enlisting.”

Alex rubbed his eyes. “You really bought into all of their shit, hook, line, and sinker, huh?”

Sebastian threw up a defensive glare to fend off his lecture. “It’s not that bad.”

“Dude, stop with the ‘I don’t deserve it’ bullshit. You know, they fed the same line of shit to the Vietnam guys when they came back. Guys had fucking Charlie dropping out of trees and shit and they laughed in their faces when they tried to get treatment for their nightmares and flashbacks. And then there was the Agent Orange which was just pure nightmare fuel thrown onto their PTSD and permanently imbedded into their brain chemistry. Speaking of which, have you gotten put on the burn-pit registry yet?”

“No, what’s that?”

Alex stopped shaking his head and leveled it with Sebastian’s. “Ok I’m going to stop with the lecture for now, but we got a lot of work to do. We’re going to work on resubmitting your claim this week and I’m going to put you in contact with some lawyers we had to use for some of my guys. None of that shit is normal, Sebastian. You didn’t have any of those problems before you went in, and your body shouldn’t have been falling apart by your mid-twenties; and it’s their responsibility to fix *everything* that they broke.”

Sebastian felt a distant sense of hope at Alex’s words, despite the self-hatred telling him he didn’t deserve the easy out. “A

higher disability rating would make paying for grad school less stressful.”

“Fucking right it would! And the Arizona VA is the best in the country and it’s exactly where you need to be to get the treatment you deserve. I’d also love it if we could figure out how to get you and Aaron around each other, too. I think it’d be really helpful for both of you. You know you two are my two favorite people in the world, right?” Alex quickly backtracked to correct his omission, “Besides Sarah, of course. Two favorite *guys* in the world.”

Sebastian’s eyes lit up, “Yeah, how is Sarah? You said she got a new job?”

“Yeah, she’s great! She misses you guys! She would have come out, but...” Alex’s eyes brightened up a little more, “Ok I haven’t said anything to Aaron yet because I didn’t want to salt the wound, so keep this under wraps,” Sebastian nodded in quick agreement, “but we’re pregnant! She’s about three months along, so the doctor’s confident it took this time, but he doesn’t want her putting herself out there because of all of her autoimmune stuff.”

Sebastian let out a giddy laugh as Melanie set their food down on the table. “Oh, that’s so awesome! I’m so happy for you guys! And excited! Oh, I’ve been saying we need more Americans like you two!”

“I know! We can’t wait to have Uncle Sebastian coming around!”

Sebastian dug his fork in and took his first bite as Alex filled him in on all of the wonderful things happening around him. Maybe it was the joy of seeing Alex again, or the hope he brought with him, but something about this ‘slice of heaven’ was different, better, more real, than all of his previous visits.

Chapter 3

November 10, 2024

It was one of those crisp, cool days that are the peak of fall weather - the first snow hadn't yet fallen, bringing with it the seemingly perpetual wetness that lasts through winter, and the memory of the hot September days were still fresh in one's mind to make one fully cognizant of just how special the day was - to be able to fully participate in any activity without a single drop of sweat and maybe only wearing a single thin, warming layer. Because of this special occasion, there was a garage door left open on the peaceful street to let the fresh air circulate out the stuffy garage air, heavy with sawdust thrown up by tools happily whining to their labors. The only other noise to break the silence of the gentle whirrs was the wind rustling through the emptying tree boughs or the occasional squirrel pair chasing each other through the dry leaves on the ground. This serenity is what had originally drawn Alex to the neighborhood when he moved in a little over two years ago, but no sooner than he moved in, did the tranquility take to mocking him, reflecting back the degrading emptiness growing within him.

Alex's handsome face that had once lent the presumption that he was warm and gentle now just sagged in a tired display, with the edges of his mouth slightly drooped like he had forgotten how to smile years ago. His face sported a thin, week-old beard and his hair was cut to a short buzzcut style, both choices borne out of apathetic utility rather than aesthetic. Tattoos crept out from underneath his sleeves and wrapped around to his upper forearms. Struck across his neck was a horizontal, one-inch-thick, scarlet stripe tattooed with black, ghastly hands grabbing at it as they fell down his neck and retreated back under his shirt collar.

Alex sat hunched over a bench tucked against the wall, while a soft-spoken teacher instructed him from a tutorial video emanating from an electronic tablet in the corner.

"I'm going to use a countersink to match a #5 screw and we're going to drill three evenly spaced holes into both ends of the two side boards. These will be where we make our butt joints. I'm also going to demonstrate how to do this using pocket-holes, but those'll be a little more advanced and require a few more specialty tools that may not be available to many of you."

Alex paused the video and began rummaging through a toolbox on the far wall for a countersink. After retrieving his tool, he screwed it into his drill and got ready to work on the board clamped to the table in front of him and pressed play on the video.

"Now using the countersink should be straightforward. Make sure you've properly measured your hole placement and that your board is secured. Once set, begin drilling where you previously marked the drill sites. Make sure you're using a consistent force directed straight down so that the screws will be guided true into the adjoining board like so..."

Alex let the video continue playing as he prepared to drill the first hole. There was a perceptible tremor in his hands as his compulsion to make perfectly aligned cuts and centered holes began to manifest as an obsessive anxiety. He sank the first drill hole and raised the drill bit from the hole to inspect his work. Perfectly centered. He sank the second drill hole and raised the drill for inspection. About an $\frac{1}{8}$ " high, but within his allowable tolerance levels. He moved onto the third hole and was met with slight resistance as the drill began biting into the wood. Just as the drill reached his desired depth and was about to be released from its work, the board split along the drill hole.

"FUCK!"

His head began shaking from side to side with a controlled violence. The video host continued along, perfectly executing his work. "Now, a lot of the wood available in stores today isn't nearly as good as what us old-timers are used to working with and, for a lot of you, the only wood that's going to be available is either cheap plywood or pines with a lot of knots and imperfections. So, there's a good chance you're going to split your boards if you're trying to drill countersinks into this cheap wood. In that case, I'd recommend that you just go with the basic wood glue and nails route for your butt joints."

"FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!" Alex let his frustrations overtake him as an uncontrollable rage sank in and he began trashing his workstation. He picked up a nearby hammer and smashed the tablet with the video mocking him and tossed everything not nailed down to his workbench onto the ground.

In a rageful voice that bellowed out through his quiet neighborhood, he yelled, "All I want is to make one stupid fucking box! Is that too much to ask for?!? Fuck this wood! Fuck these tools! Fuck this god damn brain that can't do one fucking thing right! FUCK!"

Alex slumped back against the wall and sank to the floor. With his knees in his chest, he propped up his hands to cover his face. His chest hurt from the intensified heart palpitations induced by his anger. His muscles would soon begin to ache from the surge of adrenaline. The shame from his outburst had already begun to creep in as he imagined all of the neighbors looking out their windows and whispering about him.

He gently rocked against the wall and soothed himself for a few minutes, possibly hours. He removed the hands cradling his face and reached out to pick up a nearby picture frame that had been tossed in his outburst. He turned it over to gaze upon Sarah's smiling face as she held their newborn son, Tommy.

“I’m sorry I lost my temper like that, babe.” Tears welled up in Alex’s eyes as he soothed himself with her joyful memories. “I miss you guys, and I can’t wait to see you again...I’m not sure how much longer I can take it here without you.”

Alex slowly closed his eyes and slid further off the wall into a fully prone position on the cold cement floor as he embraced the picture against his chest and let their memory soothe him into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 4

The sun had already set by the time Alex had woken up from his sleep. He slowly rose and looked around the garage. The garage door was still open and letting in a strong draft, but nothing seemed to be missing. He picked up the notepad and pen that had been thrown from the table and scribbled “18 ga nails”, “wood glue”, and “4 boards” onto an ongoing list before tossing the split board onto the quickly growing scrap pile and gingerly stepping over the closing garage door’s infrared sensor.

Dusk had already settled as Alex’s white F-150 truck rumbled into the Home Depot parking lot. The storefront’s aesthetics maintained the same familiar look that he had grown up with, but so many little details had changed since the war that it seemed foreign and unsettling to him now; like he was perceiving it through one of his stress dreams. Most of the lights illuminating the big orange letters on the store’s marquee had gone out and hadn’t been replaced. The excess equipment that used to overflow out of the store and display in the parking lot had disappeared. He parked under one of the few working streetlamps that hung in front of the boarded-up doors that locked away the store’s semi-permanently closed half.

Alex zipped up his heavy Carhartt jacket to brace himself against the cold November night setting in and briskly made his way to the single open store entrance with a trail of steamy breath following. The glass doors whooshed open and Alex stepped inside where a familiar voice greeted him.

“All right, Alex, how’s that project coming along?” The store’s security guard must have already seen Alex come and go a hundred times since he had taken up his hobby.

“Frustrating. Just buying more of the same shit.”

The guard lightly chuckled in the way borderline acquaintances give to each other. "Well at least you can afford to keep coming back. Gotta be grateful for something."

Alex returned the gesture. "Yeah, I guess you're right. Thanks for the perspective, John. I'll see you on the way out."

"All right, see ya' in a few."

Alex took a cart and pushed his way deeper into the store's interior. Further removing the store from its once familiar feeling were the thin polyethylene sheets hung from the top of the shelves to lower the roof and cut back on the HVAC costs. The sheets added a claustrophobic feeling as they slightly rustled just overhead with every passing air movement, activating Alex's hypervigilance. The hairs on the back of his neck began to raise as an unspoken threat waited for him around every corner. Conscious of his increasing heartbeat, Alex briefly shut his eyes and took a deep, controlled breath, feeling where it touched his lungs. He opened his eyes and proceeded down the memorized aisles that were still somehow unfamiliar.

His exhaustive search pattern up the lumber aisle yielded none of the solid hardwood boards he had been searching for months now, and he loaded more of the inferior but available plywood into his cart. He made his way down the fastener aisle and found the nail shelf.

As Alex searched his list for the next item, he caught two figures suspiciously approaching him in his peripherals and quickly glanced up to assess the oncoming threat. It was a man pushing a cart and a woman pushing a twin baby stroller. Alex went back to his search, but his anxieties kept scratching away at him. Alex tried to push aside his paranoia and refocus on the task at hand, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they were a threat. He looked back up at them and caught an angry glare on the man's face before the man instinctively looked away from

the confrontation. Alex felt his heart begin to race. The notepad in his hand began to tremble as the adrenaline started to kick in. He kept his body at an angle to the man without signaling that he was aware of the man's aggressive intentions as the couple slowly approached to pass behind him. The air was thick with anticipation.

"Baby murderer." The man muttered under his breath.

Alex hesitated. He knew he could deescalate the situation by simply taking the unsolicited contempt, but he also felt the uncontrollable force of his rage taking over. He turned his head to look the man directly in the eyes.

"Did you say somethi..."

Pftu. The man spit a snot-filled wad into Alex's face. "You heard me you fucking coward. You're a god damn baby killer! All of this is your fault!" The man vaguely gestured to everything around him. "How dare you show your face in public like you belong here! You should be locked up in a pound waiting to be put down with all the other strays!"

"Are you fucking kidding me?!" the wife muttered under her breath. Her eyes darted about looking for a solution to the imminent violence.

Alex wiped the spit from his face. His expression lithified as he focused his gaze on his assailant. His amber-hazel eyes had glazed over, but would not disperse from their target, paralyzing the provocateur with the burning intensity of their void.

"Understood." Alex responded without any discernible emotion and calmly, purposefully began pushing his cart down the aisle in the direction the couple had come from. A whiff of fear permeated his nostrils as he stepped past the man. The husband stumbled as he unconsciously stepped aside for Alex in a dumbfounded stupor. His wife capitalized on his confusion

and began pushing him away, making sure to stay in between her husband and the stranger to prevent another opportunity for him to reengage in the confrontation.

“Are you fucking kidding me?!” Alex could hear her hiss at the aggressive man as he made his way down the aisle and into the next. “You know exactly what I mean! Why would you talk to one of them and why would you pick a fight with him?”

The man’s voice was muffled and inaudible as Alex exited the aisle, but, like a bar bully who thinks he’s safe once the brawl has been stopped by a crowd of people, the man raised his voice as soon as Alex had rounded the corner and disappeared from his immediate sight.

“Why are you afraid of them?!” The man spoke loudly to try and convince his wife that he wasn’t afraid, but didn’t quite yell, hoping the stranger with the blood-stripe struck across his neck wouldn’t hear him. “They’re all a bunch of cowards. When they’re confronted by a real man, they all fold; just like that little faggot.”

Alex found himself in front of a locked display case of power tools. He picked up a nearby screwdriver and pried off the flimsy lock securing the case. He pulled out a nail gun from the case and loaded it with a battery from a shelf underneath before loading a sleeve of nails from the box in his basket. Every movement was fluid and efficient. Every decision was not quite his own.

“I’m afraid of them and you should be too!” The wife rasped at her husband. “In case you forgot, we have kids! And they’re here with us! What if you got hurt? What would we do for money? What if he attacked me and the kids?”

“He ain’t gonna do shit while I’m around!” The man spoke louder, emboldened further by the lack of opposition. “They

can only hurt women and children. I woulda' beat his fuckin' ass if he tried to do anything!"

Alex reemerged from around the corner wearing the same expressionless face. He was confronted by the man's back and the woman's terrified face. She tried to verbalize her fear but stood mortified from the shock.

Alex raised the nail gun and shot a series of nails up and down the man's spine, finishing him off with a pair to the throat. Alex muffled the woman's terrified scream with one hand while the other swiftly raised the nail gun to her face and paused, waiting for his internal calculations to complete.

The woman frantically began clawing at Alex's arm holding her, ripping his shirt and revealing a grotesque scene of souls reaching out from the river Styx, dragging Alex's crimson collar down to them. His empty face turned to the whimpering toddlers and the gun began to follow as he considered their fates.

"Please, no!" The woman's muted plea crept out from behind Alex's hand as her head violently shook free from behind it.

"But why?" There was an unsettling sincerity in Alex's question. "There's nothing here for them."

"Please! Don't take them away from me!" The woman's voice creaked as Alex's hand tightened around her throat.

"But why would you want them to grow up and experience all the horrors waiting for them?"

"I'll protect them!"

"That's outside of your control. Look around you, we're never going to return to the lives we once had."

"The war is over!" The woman spoke in exasperated fragments as she struggled to loosen his grip. "We can have a life now! We can rebuild!"

“But the war broke us. Ending it didn’t fix anything. There’s only suffering for us now. I can give you and your boys the kindest mercy.”

“But you’re Decimated.” The woman’s voice began to balance out as Alex loosened his grip to hear her answer. “You’re supposed to help us unite and rebuild.”

“We were overly optimistic. Twelve years wasn’t enough time for us to reunite. Can’t you see that? Just listen to your husband’s hateful slurs. There was never any hope for reunification. And that division will only increase as the Decimations unfold and there’s fewer and fewer of us. We’ll be back to war within the decade. Don’t you want to protect your boys from having to finish our unresolved war?”

“No! There’s still hope for them to grow up in a unified America. Please! I promise I’ll give everything and work towards a country worthwhile for them.”

Alex looked down at the whimpering toddlers and caught a glimpse of that hopeful spark that Tommy once inspired in him.

“It won’t be enough.” Alex sighed as he released the woman.

The mother rushed to her children and began to console them with unrestrained relief. Alex heard her quiet reassurances as he silently walked out of the aisle and around the corner. “It’s ok babies. We’re ok.”

“I’m sorry babe. I hope you’ll come find me on the other side.” Alex whispered his prayer as he held up the gun to his head and pulled the trigger to release the burdens he could no longer carry.

Chapter 5

And if we're wrong, we will be made fools of; but if we're right, a lot of them will go to jail. So, let's have trial by combat! I'm willing to stake my reputation, the President is willing to stake his reputation, on the fact that we're going to find criminality there!

- Disbarred lawyer and disgraced former NYC Mayor Rudy Giuliani

I say violence is necessary, violence is a part of American culture. It is as American as cherry pie. Black Power, Brothers.

-H. Rap Brown

You're not to be so blind with patriotism that you can't face reality. Wrong is wrong, no matter who does it or says it.

- Malcolm X

November 11, 2024

The air had a subtle kiss of sea salt as the sun began its ascent to signal the start of another quiet San Clemente morning. Besides the lights coming from the nearby bakery preparing for its customers, the only other signs of life on Camino Real were the occasional headlights from a passing car as a lone runner cut through the early marine fog. Fffft – fffft – fffft- fffft – fffft. The runner's elongated strides barely made a sound as his feet kissed the ground in the final sprint of his morning run. With a triumphant burst of energy, he leapt past the streetlight that marked his finishing line.

Sebastian quickly corrected his hunched over posture as he held up his watch and pushed the timer button to collect his data, 22:40. Faint disappointment shown under his exhausted expression at the daunting discrepancy to his ambitious three-miles-in-eighteen-minutes goal, part of the perfect PFT- score he had been trying to reattain over the last six months.

Finding it to have a mostly superfluous role in his life, Sebastian had neglected his physical fitness since the war. That was until about ten months ago when he had been selected by his old battalion commander to be one of the Decimated consultants to train the next generation in battle tactics and, more importantly, civics and their constitutional duties as warfighters. Sebastian had self-imposed his goal to ace the Marine fitness test as a way to set a good example for the younger guys who still mostly responded to the authoritarian sergeant archetype. He found that the other two pieces to a perfect score – twenty dead-arm hang pull-ups and one hundred crunches in two minutes – were relatively easy to reach and maintain, but had been struggling to improve his run time since the SSRI's had desaturated, taking most of his motivations with them. He calculated the morning's final score in his head and the subsequent stairwell sprints that would need to be completed to offset the score's deficits before half-heartedly jogging off to his apartment.

Sebastian clumsily emerged from his building's stairwell with heavy breath and fresh sweat as he dug his apartment keys out of his pocket and made his way to the apartment at the end of the empty hallway.

Sebastian locked the door behind him and turned on the coffee pot to brew. He walked over and turned on the TV for the morning news to set the ambience to his familiar morning routine and began making his way to his bedroom while reaching for the bottom cuff of his shirt stuck with sweat to his

lower back. He threw the drenched shirt into the dirty laundry hamper as he made his way into the bathroom.

The freshly bleached tile had barely sweated from the shower's growing steam before Sebastian had already rinsed the shampoo from his hair and was preparing to start working on the body. The PSA's recommended five-minute showers to help combat the growing water shortages, and although Sebastian lived well within the county's household water allowance, he had challenged himself to do even more by implementing the 2-minute navy showers he had been introduced to during his enlistment. Off went the water and in went the conditioner before lathering the upper body with soap. On went the shower to rinse the suds. Off went the shower as Sebastian bent over to scrub the wash onto his lower body. On went the shower and began Sebastian's indulgence of one straight minute of hot water. He used the excess water to first rinse out the conditioner and then moved downwards to his lower body where he directed most of the water to rinse out all of the nooks and crannies hidden in his undercarriage before the shower's automatic timer buzzed and turned the water off.

Sebastian quickly toweled off and slipped on a pair of black boxer briefs before making his way back to the kitchen to start his daily breakfast of eggs and sausage with toast. He had barely begun frying the sausage when the news anchor's voice stood out above the banal morning.

"There was a violent confrontation with a Decimated man resulting in a murder-suicide near Springfield, Missouri last night. Details are still coming in, but from what we've gathered, after a brief verbal altercation with a civilian, former Marine Sergeant Alex Postata used a nail gun on the man before shooting himself in the head."

Sebastian immediately turned off the stove when Alex's name struck him with its finality. Entranced, he slowly made his way to his seat on the couch in front of the TV.

"Joining us in the studio to talk about this tragedy is Captain Roberts, who is the current military liaison for the Decimated and National Senator Joseph Taylor of Louisiana.

Senator Taylor, you've been one of the most outspoken critics of the Decimated and were one of the few leaders to speak out against the Compromise. We actually have a clip of one of your earlier appearances from just days before its acceptance."

EXCLUSIVE: Nightly News panel discusses the compromise proposed to end the current civil war with Louisiana State Senator Joseph Taylor (R) and Federal Representative Anthony Adams (D, OH), 07/24/2022

"Look, they've shown us what atrocities they're capable of committing. Do you think they're going to stop these heinous acts just because the war is over?" Senator Taylor submitted his question with an incredulous bite.

Representative Adams spoke out against his failed reasoning, "And what do you propose we do? Just continue the war so this violence can play out daily across the country?! It'd be foolish to give up our only chance for peace just because of your speculations!"

Taylor snapped back, "If we fail to hold these men accountable for the crimes they've openly admitted to, then we'll have sacrificed our morals and values as Americans and we'll have

mortgaged our future just to stop the pain today.”

“They’ve already been sentenced for their crimes, and they’ll be held accountable! The only reason why you want this war to continue is so your party can consolidate more political power!”

“That’s ridiculous! Obviously, I want peace, but I’m not willing to pay this price. We have to bring these men to justice if we’re to move on as a nation. If we don’t, the violence will continue to haunt us.” Taylor repeated his tired argument.

“Where was this accountability and adherence to justice when the war started?! We could have prevented this war if leaders like you had stood up to the Traitor and held him accountable for his coup that was broadcast on national television!”

Another panelist chimed in to reinforce Representative Adams’ assault against Taylor’s flawed beliefs. “And now you expect the country to just keep cannibalizing itself for some unsettled score?! We can’t afford to keep fighting this war! Russia continues a devastating propaganda campaign within our ranks without opposition. China’s consolidated the east Pacific and isolated our former allies there. If we don’t take this deal now, we’ll fall apart into obscurity and lose all authority on the world stage.”

The program host cut in, “I’m told we have a breaking news segment regarding the

Compromise. Senator Taylor, I'm afraid we're going to have to cut this interview short but thank you for joining us and sharing your concerns. It looks like over forty states are going to overwhelmingly accept the Compromise. So, let's hope it works as promised and that your concerns never come true."

The senator sighed, "Yes, that's my sincere hope. Thanks for having me on."

EXCLUSIVE: Interview with National Senator Taylor, (LA, R) and Captain Roberts (Navy SOCOM, Retired) over escalated Decimated violence. 11/11/2024

"Senator Taylor, unfortunately it looks like your predictions about continued violence were correct as this most recent tragedy is another example of a violent pattern we're seeing across the country, especially as we approach the first wave of Decimations in the coming year." The news host lobbed his softball to the latest media darling.

"Yes, well this is one case where I wish I'd been wrong. This is an absolutely horrifying scene, but like you said, this is just one example of the pattern of violence we're experiencing. My fear is that these examples are only going to get worse over the next decade."

"The violence certainly does seem to be getting worse. Captain Roberts, what are your thoughts on this incident?"

"Thank you for having me on, Sarah." The captain spoke with a military bearing that

refused to acknowledge the petty barbing of the news host. "First, I want to acknowledge what a truly terrible tragedy this is. This episode is a grim reminder of what our daily reality was less than two years ago, and I think it's important here for us to remember that it was the Decimated who ended the war for us. Senator Taylor, wouldn't you agree that a 68% reduction in reported violent crimes over these last two years is a desperately needed improvement for our country?" The former Navy Seal shifted his body weight to face the senator head on and exclude the non-threatening host. He had yet to figure out this freshman senator and hadn't quite decided if he could be left alone yet or not.

"Except the violent crimes remain at doubles and triples of the national pre-war averages. And the overwhelming majority of the most heinous crimes are being carried out by the Decimated. The simple truth we all see here is that they never stopped the war. While the rest of us are just trying to rebuild and move on, they continue with this unprovoked violence like they're still enforcing this martial 'code' none of us on the outside understand!" Everything about the politician's posturing registered as sincere to the sailor's schooled eyes.

"These are not 'unprovoked' instances, senator. Our investigations consistently show that these outbursts are provoked by far-right sympathizers. And let's not forget that those were the people who started our war, who

giddily whispered 'civil war' behind parlor doors for decades before this; and politicians like you nurtured and stoked that treasonous blasphemy just to keep your stranglehold on power." The captain sent a warning shot across the senator's bow, escalating his hostilities to protect his Decimated charge and distract the senator.

The senator stood his ground and wasn't going to be distracted with the captain's bluffs. "I was a state senator at the time, and I had nothing to do with the federal elections. Since becoming a National Senator, I've remained committed to maintaining the peace, but we can't have peace when we refuse to hold these murderers accountable!"

"If you want peace, then tell your constituents to leave my men alone. That's the only requirement for successfully coexisting with the Decimated, and over and over again it's your supporters picking fights with these guys and if..."

Senator Taylor cut off the exhausted arguments, "Americans shouldn't have to live in fear of these men! You expect us to be so grateful to these men because they chose to commit atrocities against us? But only on the condition that we bow down and kiss their boots? What happened to our freedom of speech?"

Senator Taylor's face gave Roberts more intel about the man he was probing. Satisfied with his finding, he decided it was time to bring the

Senator back to reality and make him remember who was sitting in front of him. "First of all, Senator, we don't live in that America anymore. America gave up its right to free speech when your predecessors actively aided a coup on live TV. So don't try to invoke rights to freedoms that your people abused and lost for us. Secondly, you want us to hate these men for their violence during the war? Well, their inhumanity is what stopped our war and has given us a chance to rebuild and regain what we've lost. Lastly, let's remember that these men brought the Compromise to us, and they won't be around forever, so we need to take advantage of this opportunity they've given us while there's still hope for unification."

"But Captain," the news anchor slid her chair to within firing range of Captain Roberts, "the war is over, so can you concede that these disturbing events should have no place in our country now?"

"You're right, Sarah. The war is over; but the divisive and seditious rhetoric undermining our country still lingers. That's why the Decimated are a necessity for us to move forward."

"So, are you condoning these violent outbursts as some sort of deterrent for peace?" The senator edged out his ally to refocus the captain's attention.

"No. I'm saying you should be grateful that these men still believe in America, senator. I understand your party may not want them around because the threat of the Decimated

are the only thing preventing further sedition, but also remember that this was never your decision. Remember who proposed the Compromise.”

Dent turned the TV off and froze in the black screen’s unforgiving reflection. Even with the freckles and razor burns to soften its whetted edges, the ruby red of the blood-stripe slit across his neck still shouted its bright proclamation to the world. He was grateful that the tattoo stopped his eyes from exploring upwards into the penetrating stare he feared. He looked down at the phone open to the intended contact’s name; MORSON, AARON. His fingers hesitated, briefly protesting before obeying Sebastian’s command. The phone only rang twice before Dent was reconnected to a voice he’d almost forgotten.

“Hello?”

“Hey it’s Dent. Have you seen the news about Postata?”

“Yeah, I got a call last night,” Aaron spoke with an alert edge hinting at another Adderall run “I was going to call you, but....well”

“Yeah, I know.” Dent’s voice still weighed heavy with regret at his decision to call. “What did they do with the body?”

“I’ve already made some calls and I’m headed out this morning to secure it.”

Sebastian packed as they talked, not bothering to mask his works from Aaron. Morson heard the bolt slam home on Sebastian’s DPMS RePR .308 rifle.

“I should be in Missouri by this evening.”

“So, there will be a funeral? I take it he still wanted to be buried out here in Pendleton?” Dent’s 1911 snapped off a metallic bark as the slide returned home.

“Yes and yes.”

Sebastian cinched the old-school rucksack’s bands down, sending out their whizzing signal to Aaron. “Ok. I’m going to have to find a ride, but I’m headed out there today to help you make arrangements.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can just link up with you out there.”

“He was my friend too. I’m going to make sure he’s buried where he belongs.”

“Ok. Yeah. I’ll probably need your help with this one since he sky-lined himself. Thanks.....Hey Sebastian? I’ve missed you brother.”

The hard plastic of the pelican case holding Sebastian’s weapons snapped close. “I’ll keep you posted on my ETA.” Sebastian hung up before Aaron could respond.

The pelican case, rucksack, and overnight bag politely waited by the front door while Sebastian made his second and third rounds checking everything in the apartment was off and where it was supposed to be. Having satisfied his anxieties, he removed the pot of burnt coffee, poured a mug’s worth into his thermos, and poured the rest out down the sink. He packed on his gear in a practiced configuration and stepped out into the hallway. The military-stenciled ~~DENT, SEBASTIAN~~ on the end of his rifle case was the last piece of him to say goodbye to yet another stopping point.

Chapter 6

Sebastian Dent entered the Camp Pendleton Air Station parking lot at a relatively early 7:00 am. His Toyota Tundra stood out in the crowded lot with its pristine voodoo-blue paint, upgraded suspension, and heavy-duty accessories that told curious onlookers that this truck had been made with a purpose and could get the driver damn near anywhere. It also implied who's truck it was. There weren't a lot of people with the money or connections to put a truck like that together anymore, and there were even fewer that had the stones to flaunt that kind of money and leave it unattended in a public space, military or otherwise.

Sebastian packed on his gear in practiced order and slammed the tailgate closed before returning to triple-check the cab for loose items. He cradled his heavy oilfield jacket in his left elbow and nudged the door home with his hip and locked the truck, making sure to register multiple chirps from the electronic security system before stashing his keys away and grabbing his coffee mug from the roof. He walked back to the bed of the truck, checked again to make sure nothing had been forgotten and hoisted his rifle case from the warm pavement and made his way to the modest office dwarfed by the giant hangar that housed it.

Sebastian hesitated in the doorway to allow his pupils to adjust from the bright morning to the shaded office dimly lit by fluorescent bulbs. A young corporal in his dress charlies stood duty at the flight coordination desk and greeted him with a familiar wave.

"Good morning, *Mr. Dent*," The younger guys seemed to take great relish in emphasizing his civilian title; as far as Sebastian could tell, it was a term of endearment or respect, but he hadn't given it enough thought to definitively verify that claim. "What are we getting into today?"

“Hey Reyes,” Dent gave a familiar nod, “I’m trying to get to Springfield, Missouri. You got anything headed that way?”

The young clerk pulled up the day’s roster on his screen and began searching.

“The closest we have on today’s flight log is Vance Air Base outside of Oklahoma City. Captain Hegerhorst is dropping off a couple of squads out there to provide supporting presence for the Texas marches. They should be taking off here in a few minutes after they’re done with their pre-flight checks. You wanna’ ride with them?”

“Yeah, that’ll work for me. Call it in.”

Corporal Reyes pulled on his pants and straightened his uniform to crisp lines throughout as he stood up and looked out the window. He held up the oversized black radio and began his transmission to the flight tower.

“Hey tower, can you hold off on sending flight Poppa-Charlie-0-3-niner-2? We’re adding Sebastian Dent to the flight roster now and we’ll be sending him out in a sec.”

The tower’s response came in with static and heavy volume dysregulation despite the proximity of the signal. “Roger. Has anyone called dibs on his truck yet? I’m trying to get out to the dunes this weekend.”

Reyes gave Sebastian a questioning glance. Sebastian just shrugged and tossed the keys; the young tower commander was a good kid and understood consequences. Besides, it was still marginally better than leaving it unattended.

“I’ll be back in four days. Tell him not to fuck it up.”

The radio let out its digital beeps as the young NCO held it up for his response. “He says you got it for a 96 as long as you promise not to let any of your dates ride in it, sir. His suspension can’t handle that kind of stress.”

“You’re a fucking menace, Reyes.”

Reyes chuckled as Sebastian made his way to the back door and out onto the tarmac.

The airfield was alit with energy as harrier pairs screamed off the main runway, CH-46 and CH-53 helicopters set down for minute-long rests as new passenger teams or supplies were loaded on, and the Ospreys patiently waited for their turn on the runway with each bird trailed by two twelve-man sticks of Marines waiting for transport to the week’s theater. Dent walked up to the last Osprey in line that was slotted to carry the remainder of a platoon. The pilot was still busy checking various fuel and hydraulic lines with the maintenance crew when he caught sight of the newest addition to his flight log.

“Captain Hegerhorst?”

“Yeah, that’s me. You Sebastian Dent?” The captain made a gesture to the headphones bulging from his flight helmet.

“They just called you in. I still need to manually add you to my flight log, but for now, feel free to stage your gear with the guys and stand by. I’ll come get you when I need your info.”

“No problem.”

Sebastian staged his gear behind a row of four neatly aligned packs that made up the last incomplete stick. The weapons neatly resting on the packs indicated the row belonged to a traditional fireteam of riflemen. An M4 rifle rested on the team leader’s front pack, while an unclipped leg holster holding an M9 pistol sat next to it. Next, was the designated marksman’s M38 rifle delicately resting atop a plate carrier with all sorts of specialized pockets to help him hold his oversized magazines, suppressor, shooting book and calculation tables. Behind the DM’s pack was the grenadier’s pack with another M4 rifle and his M32A1 launcher, essentially an oversized revolver with a buttstock and six chambers capable of firing 40mm grenades;

and then the lowly a-gunner's gear comically-overloaded with the grenadier's excess grenades and team's claymores, LAW's, and other excess gear.

Sebastian reflected on how the fireteam had evolved since his service in the OIF/OEF wars. His old position as squad machine-gunner had been replaced by the designated marksman and upgraded grenadier positions. The Marine Corps' decision to phase out the M-249 squad automatic weapon to focus on the grenadier's indirect explosive power was a natural adaptation to the urban combat environments the Marines had inadvertently begun specializing in.

In the stick across from him, Sebastian noticed that there were two heavy machine gun teams with their .50 cal machine gun receivers, tripods, barrels, and ammo heavily-weighing down each team-member's pack. He addressed the lone PFC standing watch over the packs while his squadmates enjoyed their last moments in the rear buying sodas and candy out of the roach coach parked beside the hangar.

"I thought they were still on presence patrols in Texas. What are y'all doing with crew-served's?"

The private snapped to parade rest for Sebastian, unsure how to address the Decimated man that was also waiting to board their flight.

"Apparently things are heating up down there. There's a lot of whispers that shit's about to get real fun." The kid gave a knowing smile to Sebastian, who he expected to share in celebrating his upcoming initiation, but Sebastian winced at the painful reminder of the bloodlust he once held as absolute truth. The truth he had clearly failed to protect the next generation from. The truth he still struggled to fully condemn.

"Oh, I see," Sebastian paused, "just remember that those are fellow Americans when you're on the ground out there."

The PFC awkwardly took his quiet chastisement.

"Oh, ummm, yes sir. Sorry sir."

"It's ok." Sebastian pulled out a pack of cigarettes from his pack's lid and tossed it to the kid. Sebastian didn't smoke anymore but liked to keep cartons of cigarettes and logs of dip on him as a way to break the ice and offer a small mercy to the kids.

"Ok the tower's got you cleared, and I just need you to sign my flight log." Captain Hegerhorst returned from finishing his last-minute maintenance. "You condition four on those weapons?"

Dent snapped open his rifle case and held out his guns' empty chambers for the pilot's inspection.

"Any chance you can take a detour after you drop these guys off and drop me off closer to Springfield, Missouri?"

"No can do, sir. Dallas is popping off and these guys already got orders. No telling when this bird'll be free again."

"Understood. Good luck with that."

Chapter 7

*Let's have a war
so you can go and die.
Let's have a war;
we can all use the money
Let's have a war;
we need the space
Let's have a war;
clean out this place.*

Ding-dong.

The organic music of the door's bell resonated across the concrete floors of the open space in a ghastly A-minor with the sound waves, no longer obstructed by a full suite of furniture and decorations, echoing and crashing off of each other to create a symphony of compounding chords and notes.

Sebastian paused the video game and looked up, wondering who could be at the door. He wasn't expecting any deliveries, and he rarely received solicitors in his house tucked away in the back of Tucson's Barrio Viejo. He cautiously approached the front door and slowly wedged it open and braced its backside with his foot. Anger flushed into his expression when he was presented with a face he expected to never have to see again.

"Hey Sebastian." Aaron offered a bashful smile.

"I told you I don't have anything left for you, Aaron. What do you want?" Sebastian's voice was terse and his temper was short.

"I need to talk to you about something."

"I've got nothing to say to you."

"Sebastian, please, I need to talk with you." Aaron withheld his ire to avoid their aggressive escalations.

“There’s nothing here for you, Aaron. I already talked to a realtor and I’m going to sell the house.” Sebastian removed his face from the gap to close the door.

Aaron shoved his foot into the gap. “Sebastian, I’ve been reactivated.”

“What?”

“They reactivated my program. I’ve accepted and I want to talk to you about it. May I please come in?”

Dent searched Aaron’s face for any signs of deception. He appeared to be sincere. He heaved out an angry sigh and removed his foot from behind the door. He pulled it open and held his arm up to direct Aaron inwards. The entrance wall behind Sebastian was still spackled with hanging picture mounts, but the framed memories had been stashed away in a cardboard box tucked away in the coat closet.

“I was about to eat dinner. I got stuff for sandwiches if you need to eat.”

“Thanks. I’m good.” Aaron weaved his way around the familiar turns into the kitchen with Sebastian in close pursuit.

“So, I thought they had no use for you anymore. Why are you going back?” Sebastian pulled out the Tupperware of tomato-sauced pasta and threw it in the microwave for a minute.

“Sebastian, our country is about to fall apart. Everything we were talking about is manifesting. I’m here to recruit you.”

Sebastian replied with a look of annoyed disbelief. This rouse was a pretty childish way for Aaron to get him to start talking again. “Listen, Aaron, if this is true, then I’m happy that you’ve found your purpose again, but let’s stop with the silly fantasizing. I was a machine-gunner. I don’t have your sniper training, and I have zero exposure to your secret squirrel shit. I don’t have any strategic advantage for you to leverage unless

you're going to march down to the armory and pick me up a machine gun."

"Sebastian, I think you're reasoning under the wrong assumptions here. This isn't about me and you. This is about the fate of our country. I know we got a lot of shit that we still gotta work through before we're an effective unit, but I need you to let go of your..of your.." Aaron stalled looking for the right word that wouldn't set off Sebastian's fuse.

"My what, Aaron?! My hurt? My spite? My *hatred*?" Dent pulled out his meal and slammed the microwave door.

"Your wrath, Sebastian." Aaron's voice was gentle and non-confrontational.

"And why shouldn't I be angry, Aaron?" Sebastian spoke with a spiteful edge.

"Sebastian..." Aaron's eyes exposed everything that he was, "I know that you're hurt, and I know you're lashing out to protect yourself because you're afraid."

Sebastian's eyes widened. Aaron was right, but not for the reasons he suspected. Without guns, Aaron had an 80%-90% chance of stomping Sebastian into the ground if they got into it, with a high probability for a flawless victory. The only way that Sebastian could keep a protective edge was if he maintained his guard for any opportunity to lash out at Aaron with his maiming hatred and exploit any subsequent opportunities with violence of action. But Sebastian wasn't concerned with his physical safety. He had already lived with the threat of Aaron's savagery and successfully coexisted with other monsters that fatally-threatened him his whole life. Rather, Sebastian was afraid of what shown through Aaron's eyes. He was afraid of discovering what else Aaron could take from him.

“Ok, give me your pitch, then. I’ll let you know when I’ve heard enough.” Sebastian set the steaming dish down on the counter and stared across the kitchen island at Aaron.

“So, my group was set up as a tertiary contingency for scenarios like this where a radicalized regime has taken control of the levers of power. The problem is that a large constituency of our group has been compromised by the president’s fascist rhetoric and we don’t have any contingencies for this development. Over 35% of our group has been potentially compromised, rendering us combat ineffective for the mission we’re tasked with. We have to fill out our ranks with trustworthy conscripts.”

“Ok but what the fuck are you going to do with a machine-gunner?”

“Sebastian, you’re a fucking Marine and I’ve seen your groupings with that rifle of yours. More than that, I’m recruiting you for your integrity, resourcefulness, dependability, and because I know for a fact that you still believe in your country despite the bitterness you harbor for it.”

“Aaron,” the wall in Sebastian’s voice began to dismantle as he allowed the hurt to escape, “I’m still working on forgiving myself for all of those Afghanis. How do you expect me to answer for the murders of other Americans?”

“Sebastian, this is your chance to fight for the right side. This is your chance to hold all of those war mongers accountable and give them their share of the profits. This is your chance to show them the true depths of depravity. Give them what they’ve been begging us for as they slowly infected our country with their insidious boasting and false posturing.”

“Aaron, you know there are no good guys in a war; only victims. You just said a third of your own group got compromised by the President’s lies. Can you really convince yourself that a man deserves death when he probably just got caught up in the

propaganda? And who are you to decide when one American deserves death and the other doesn't? What makes you righteous enough to choose?"

"This is different. We've been monitoring these groups and we know who the targets are."

"And then there will just be more targets. And more targets. Because the people responsible for the war will never be held accountable and they'll just continue the cycle of misery just to stay in power."

"Not this time."

"Explain it to me then."

"Ok," Aaron took a deep breath, "Twelve years ago, we began to notice a rise in white nationalist sentiments correlated to the start of President Black's administration. Then, after President Black was elected for the second time, we saw a significant increase in the number of conspiracy theories published online. Even more concerning, shortly after this resurgence in conspiracy generation we saw the transmissibility of these conspiracy theories increase significantly. When I say transmissibility, I mean increases in consumption of these articles by 10,000%, increases in the likelihood of them being publicly reshared by a node by over 80%, chances of radicalization increased by 40%, and the temporal duration of the conspiracy theories increased three-fold."

"Ok? Anyone that's been paying attention could tell you this. What's your point?"

"Sebastian, do you want the explanation or not?"

"Yeah, go ahead" Sebastian shook his head as he stabbed at his dinner, "you're already starting to lose me, though."

"At the beginning, a lot of these were innocuous like the 'flat-earth' theory, but they quickly began to gravitate towards a

white-nationalist narrative. Almost all of them were based on how the American government had been infiltrated by non-Americans working against the target-audience's best interests. At first, we fingered Russia as the obvious culprit for the propaganda, but our analysts quickly learned that Russian trolling farms lacked the insight into American culture to write an effective narrative that possessed the emotional inertia needed for them to propagate off of the American psyche. We soon came to discover that the most virulent theories had domestic origins and had large clusterings of traits that lined up with conservative America's value system; many of them were centered around the southern civil war that we never really resolved and allowed to fester."

"Oh, southern republicans wanted a civil war? What gave it away? The confederate flags flying everywhere or decades of politicians like Strom Thurman and Trent Lott openly calling to reignite the civil war? Normalizing it so that all of their white constituents wouldn't have to feel bad about their inbred beliefs discussed behind closed doors?! Get to the fucking point, Aaron! You don't need a Ph.D. in data analytics to figure this shit out!"

"Dent, stop." Morson's eyes leveled as his tone reprimanded Dent. Sebastian recognized and calmly accepted his only warning.

"Around the same time that we saw these concerning trends, we began our intelligence gathering and developing our strategies to counteract the dynamic scenarios unfolding. Over the last seven years we've been introducing our own conspiracy theories, mostly into far-right internet forums, and using embedded digital signatures to trace their progression and evolution across the internet. The majority of them would remain mostly intact as they migrated from far-right messaging boards to alt-right sub-Reddits and eventually to conservative communities on social media sites, but roughly a fifth of them

would mutate into conspiracy theories based wholly on race and the decline of ‘white-America’. There were no discernible patterns within the stories that could tell us why these theories were selected to evolve and be incorporated into the anti-American zeitgeist of the movement; most of them shared the same elements and themes of previous and concurrent iterations of our fabrications. The only pattern that we could correlate was where these stories were introduced, and we quickly learned that these stories were being dismantled and reincorporated at their source-points and that the most successful launches came from certain groups that shared a subtler version of a white-nationalist ideology; with connections to powerful benefactors; and sponsored by more legitimate informational sites that hosted the stories and legitimized them, enabling them to be disseminated further; and the subscriber bases of the more legitimate sites contained exceptionally high percentages of respected community members – local politicians, lawyers, doctors, news reporters, business owners – that had a high expectancy to republish on their own social media pages.”

Sebastian respectfully interrupted, “You’re talking about the catch-and-release types. What about the real leaders of this movement? What about the anchors at FaKts News? The ones that, for decades, systematically normalized the police-state and made this sedition reasonable in the minds of half of the fucking country?”

“Don’t you worry about that. Teams are already in place and plans are already in motion. Every last Robert Murderer, every last Carl Fuckerson will be taken care of. Every last dollar that they profited by vulturing America’s carcass will be accounted for. Every last person that helped them broadcast will be exterminated. Family, friends, acquaintances...anyone that ever humanized these people will disappear. You’ll have your retribution within two weeks’ time.” Aaron saw Sebastian’s

face soften and open up to the possibility of joining his operation.

“But I won’t personally be participating in those ops?”

“No.”

Sebastian gave one agreeing head nod. He couldn’t have expected to be a part of the teams that took down America’s biggest traitors. Not with this much at stake. Not with his experience.

“So, you’re saying we’re going to target the benefactors and moderators of these most malicious groups and that’ll be it?”

“Yes and no. Some of these guys will be on your list, but we’re also going to have to include lower-tier group members that were influential within their communities and were consistently active propaganda-spreaders. Our analysts developed an algorithmic list of targets that was based on a number of factors such as the number of theory-reshares, personal contributions and alterations to theories, number of radicalized directly influenced by them, and frequency and size of personal donations to these far-right groups. Anyone with an algorithmic score of 7.0 out of 10.0 or higher have been identified for culling.”

“How many people is that?”

“About 17% of the movement.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“Roughly twelve and a half million in total.”

Sebastian’s eyes widened as the realization dawned on him.

“And how many guys are in your group?”

“We have 23,000 uncompromised agents right now. We have an additional 260,000 veterans that we’ve identified for

conscription, but our recruitment rate is well below the 40% threshold that we need for our margins.”

Sebastian set down his fork and paused to make the mental calculations.

“Aaron, assuming that I take my fair share, you’re asking me to stack hundreds of American bodies.”

“Yes, I know. Everyone on your list will be 8’s or higher, though; and you’ll also get significant lead way in curating your list. And I’ll be right there being held accountable with you.”

“Oh? Why would I get selective treatment?”

“Because we need guys that will be extremely familiar with their area of operations and capable of infiltrating and operating out of sites without raising suspicions. The easiest way to do this is to base them around where they grew up so that their family and friend networks can provide covers, but we’re having an especially difficult time in recruiting members from the southeastern states.”

Sebastian’s eyes continued to connect the possibilities. “I see. So, I’ll be operating out of Mississippi?”

Aaron failed to make eye contact. “South Mississippi and central to northern Louisiana.”

“Mmm-hmm, I see.” Sebastian could guess who the bulk of his targets would be. He recognized the overwhelming part of him that wanted to take his retribution but could also estimate what those reparations would cost him. It wasn’t an equitable deal; adding those faces to his mental rolodex would most likely send him over the edge, but why should he care? He was already a cursed man living on borrowed time and every new face that he carried with him would be one less that someone else would have to carry. Who knows? Maybe his ticket would

finally get punched and he wouldn't have to wait until he worked up the courage again to try and self-terminate.

Emotionless, Sebastian gave Aaron his answer. "All right, I'll do it. But I got a few names that better be on my list."

A wry smile crept into Aaron's expression. "Obviously. I chose our first insertion point just for you."

"Well, our first stop is going to be the Scottsdale Gun Club. I gotta pick up my guns out of storage."

"All right, pack your gear tonight and we'll leave first thing in the morning."

"It's in the garage, mostly ready to go. There's still that piss-soaked mattress that Katrina left behind in her room. I'll bring some blankets for you to set up and sleep in there, but I don't want to see you out here tonight."

"Understood." Aaron turned to settle into his room when he halted and turned back to Sebastian. "Hey Sebastian?"

"Yeah?"

"Welcome to Operation Decimation."

*Let's have a war;
sell the rights to the networks.
Let's have a war;
let our wallets get fat like last time.
Let's have a war;
give guns to the queers.
Let's have a war;
the enemy's within.*

Chapter 8

*I know the pieces fit
'Cause I watched them fall away
Mildewed and smoldering
Fundamental differing
Pure Intention juxtaposed
Will set two lovers' souls in motion
Disintegrating as it goes
Testing our communication*

Sebastian woke up with the eastern sun poking through his barren window. He felt like he did before all of his field ops, unrested and anxious. He wasn't nervous about anything being dangerous or too difficult for him; rather, it was more of a vague anxiety about all of the tedium and little discomforts he'd have to put up with. The thought of road-tripping with Aaron across the country just made it that much worse.

Sebastian rose from the bed, only half aware of the reality around him but fully aware of every joint creaking as the movement encouraged lubrication into his moving parts. He stood up in an exaggerated arch and began to stretch with his hands on his hips. He slowly made his way to the shower and waited for it to heat to a nice steam. Conscious of the luxury that wouldn't be readily available to him for the foreseeable future, he lingered under the calming stream until he felt it hit the inflection point from warm to tepid as the tank emptied. He took his time toweling off and made his way to the sink to reinstitute his military disciplines and shave off the weeks-old stubble, before brushing and flossing his neglected teeth.

He returned to the bedroom to find his uniform of the day neatly folded and still waiting for him in front of his staged gear. He had chosen to wear his loosest fitting jeans and tennis shoes today; there would be plenty of time to agitate his pressure points with the combat boots that never quite fit and

irritate his skin with his rugged, old military fatigues. He had chosen to start his upcoming deployment wearing one of his favorite shirts from his favorite movie. It was a white t-shirt with the words “I AM AWAITED IN VALHALLA” inscribed in sharp, black lettering circling a black skull with black flames rising above it – the insignia of the War Boys fighting for their chance to die historic on the Fury Road for their deified warlord, Immortan Joe.

Formation-ready, Sebastian hoisted his plate carrier and empty gun case and made his way to the driveway to start packing his gear away in the back of Aaron’s truck. Except, when he stepped out into the quiet morning, Aaron’s old Bronco wasn’t waiting for him. The familiar sickly feeling instantly set into his stomach as he threw his gear into a disheveled pile and quickly made his way back inside. He threw open the door connecting the front entryway to the garage and found his little white sedan was missing.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, FUUUUCK!!”

He ran over to Katrina’s old room where he had lodged Aaron and slammed open the door. Aaron was missing and so was his gear.

“Fucking Aaron! What the fuck were you thinking, Sebastian!”

He smashed through the bedroom door that had concealed Aaron’s doings and now blocked his way to the rest of the house. He punched new holes into the drywall that he had just patched and painted a few weeks ago to repair Katrina’s extensive damage.

“LET ME FUCKING FIND YOU AGAIN, AARON!!” Sebastian vowed to put two to the chest and one to the head if he ever saw his friend again. He aimlessly wandered into the kitchen and leaned on the island’s counter to brace the uncontrollable

shaking. With heavy breathing, he quietly continued berating himself.

"You should have known better, Sebastian. It's not fair. Why do you allow this?"

"Sebastian, what's wrong?" Aaron's unassuming question felt like another trick of his mind. Sebastian looked up, eyes glowing with hatred.

"What the fuck are you doing here?!" he asked incredulously.

"What are you talking about? I went to go get breakfast burritos." Aaron held up the paper bag with the Seis Kitchen label. "What's going on with you?!" The aggression crept into Aaron's voice as he began to piece together the reasoning unfolding in Sebastian's brain.

"And you took my car?!"

"Yeah, what's mine is yours and what's yours is mine, right?"

"That doesn't apply anymore and you know it! You lost that privilege when you decided that what's mine is also *hers*." Sebastian pointed an accusatory finger towards Katrina's old room. He kept his head lowered to keep his shame to himself.

"Sebastian, I'm sorry, I just assumed it was ok since we're going to be driving around in it together."

"And what happened to your Bronco? You think my Camry's ideally suited for tactical ops?"

"I left it with Katrina...when I dropped her off in LA." Aaron's response was unapologetic. "And your Camry will do well for keeping a low profile, but we'll upgrade to something four-wheel-drive once things start unfolding." Aaron set the breakfast down in front of Sebastian and walked around to find the damage he suspected were attached to Sebastian's bloodied and dusty knuckles. "Jesus, Sebastian. I was going to tell you nice job on the patchwork, but...well shit man. I guess

I'll fix it when we get back since that was technically supposed to be my job the first time."

"Yeah, four fucking coats of paint to rematch the walls and cover up that midnight blue she slopped onto that stupid-ass accent wall of hers." Sebastian wasn't going to apologize to Aaron. Sure, he didn't handle the situation how the therapy had taught him, but Aaron was going to have to own up to his own share of the responsibility before Sebastian caved anymore.

"All right, well, let's eat breakfast and pack the car and take off. Nothing we can do about this now."

*There was a time that the pieces fit,
but I watched them fall away.
Mildewed and smoldering,
Strangled by our coveting.
I've done the math enough to know,
The dangers of our second guessing.
Doomed to crumble unless we grow
and strengthen our communication.*

Chapter 9

The mechanical whirr of the Osprey's engines rotating to their vertical configuration signaled the bird's final approach to Vance Air Force Base. The ethereality tickled in Sebastian's stomach while he did a quick tactile check for all of his gear during their descent. The helicopter landed with an abrupt thud, rattling awake the Marines still waiting for their final destination.

"Stay safe, gents." Sebastian yelled above the dual engines' droll and whirr of the electrical motors as he gave a quick wave and nod to another slate of forgotten faces before hoisting his gear on his shoulders and quickly shuffling out the opening bay door in the back of the bird.

The Pendleton airfield had been busy, but this was chaos. From the sky, it looked like a co-op of bugs frantically collaborating towards a master plan that was indiscernible to a higher consciousness. Trucks raced across the tarmac to fuel the thirsty aircraft anxiously waiting for their next orders to take off. Workers sprinted to offloading birds to direct the supplies and transiting soldiers. If you were to stop one of the hundreds of animated clones and ask them what they were working towards, not one of them would be able to answer you, but undoubtedly, they would tell you, "I'm just doing what my NCO told me to do."

Dent stepped out into the crisp Oklahoma air and felt the invigorating chill immediately penetrate his skin. He stopped to quickly don his heavy oil field jacket before rehoisting his gear and quickly marching off the tarmac. He briefly considered hitching a ride to the base's entrance but, given the current activity levels, decided it would be best if he just walked the two miles to the front gate.

About thirty minutes and a full head of steam later, Sebastian had made it to base entrance. He set down the heavy gun case

and stretched his hand to work out the arthritic onset as his left hand unzipped the heavy jacket. He sat down on a nearby bench and began assessing the car-hires lined up outside the gate while he let the steam dissipate from his head. He took note of a few faces that looked as though they could be suitable for the journey, or at the very least have enough sense to not ask questions about things that don't concern them.

Having identified his targets, Dent zipped his heavy winter jacket up all the way and tucked in the ends of a concealing scarf down the neck while he stood up to make his way to further investigate his potential drivers. He approached the line of cars from the rear to draw less attention to himself as he deliberately and slowly surveilled each driver and ride. He stopped when he reached his most promising target.

Parked third in line was an old, dark blue Subaru Forrester with large patches of paint fading and peeling from years of the continental interior's harsh seasons. On the sun-bleached rear bumper, he found the familiar Vietnam veteran and Marine Corps veteran bumper sticker combo and knew this would be his most viable bet. He walked up slowly to the passenger window and set his bags down. The driver leaned over and rolled down the window.

"You looking for a ride?"

"Yeah, I'm headed to Springfield and I'm kind of in a rush, so I'll pay you a premium."

"Oh, sorry man. The state line is as far as I go in these conditions. Can't get too far from home, y'know?"

Sebastian had already anticipated a negative response from any of the targets he approached. "I'm on my way to help one of the Marines from my old unit. Is there a way that you can help us out? Marine to Marine? Like I said, I have money to generously compensate you."

“I’m sorry man I can’t afford to get stranded over there, and I’m not comfortable risking the toll roads by myself at night.”

Sebastian could sense no remorse in the driver’s voice, only self-preservation and indifference as the man began rolling the window back up to close the conversation. He calmly placed his left hand on top of the window to halt its progress and brought up his right hand to unzip his jacket and unknot his scarf, revealing his scarlet aposematism.

“Let me rephrase that. I’m going to give you two centicoins to take me to Springfield. If you want your payment in dollars, that can also be arranged.”

The driver’s eyes met Dent’s. Sebastian registered the nervous energy building as the man tried to piece together a defense that would deliver him from his predicament. The driver’s eyes scanned beyond Sebastian’s, made their way past his ominous marking, and came to rest on the black Springfield Armory 1911 Operator pistol bulging out from his waist, with Sebastian’s hand patiently standing by next to it. Resigned to his fate, the man sighed and pressed the button to unlock the back of his car.

“Well at least you’re generous. Get in and let’s get this over with. I’m not overnighing in that dump.”

Sebastian walked around to the back of the Subaru and raised open the back hatch. He placed his gear in the back and took off his jacket and threw it on top. He scooped up his overnight bag and made his way to the driver’s door.

“Get out.”

“Uhh, are you driving?” Concern crept into the driver’s voice as Dent’s bearing continued to remove more of his autonomy.

Dent opened the door, and the driver did as instructed. Sebastian leaned in the car and began feeling and searching every potential concealing corner in the car’s cockpit. He

opened the center console and found what he was looking for – a loaded Colt 1911 that had been hidden under a false bottom. Sebastian pulled out of the cab and turned to present his findings to the man.

“For the toll roads.” The man sheepishly answered Sebastian’s silent accusation.

“I’ll be holding onto this for the duration of our ride. I’ll give it back to you once we’ve arrived at my destination.”

Sebastian walked around the car and climbed into the rear passenger seat. He preferred this seat because it gave him the best vantage point of the driver’s hands and also gave him effortless control of the environment because of how vulnerable it made his opposition.

The driver got in and turned on the car. The classic rock station resumed its broadcast and quieted the atmosphere with its soft melody as the car pulled out of the queue.

Riders on the Storm,

Riders on the Storm,

Into this house we’re born,

Into this world

we’re thrown,

Like a dog without a bone,

The heavy rain began to coalesce into an early winter slurry of water and ice that coated the roadway with lethal slickness.

Don-Dont-do-don’t – The precipitation’s unrelenting warning pelted the car’s metal roof as Sebastian’s ferry obeyed the inescapable currents funneling them into the interstate.

“The heater’s on the fritz, so if it gets too hot in here then just roll down the window.”

“Ok thanks.” Sebastian noticed the man’s eyes kept returning to the mirror to catch covert glimpses of the back seat. Sebastian continued to look out his window, hoping that the man was spooked enough to not engage him.

“I’m Charlie, by the way.”

Sebastian gave a nod of acknowledgement but didn’t reciprocate. His name wasn’t important.

“So did you hear about one of your guys shooting up a Home Depot in Springfield?”

“Yeah. I’m on my way there to bury him.” Sebastian hoped that his connection to the heinous killer would be enough to satisfy the man’s curiosity and give him enough sense to end the conversation.

“Oh? So you guys do bury your dead?” The driver gave a half-hearted chuckle at what he thought was a clever quip while Sebastian took his attention from the passing trees and met the dimwitted man in the mirror.

This fucking mouth-breather, Sebastian thought to himself.

“Yeah. We bury our dead.” Sebastian’s expressionless face and low, gravelly voice told the man that Sebastian wasn’t amused. His gravity overwhelmed the mirror and pushed the driver out, forcing him to refocus on the road. Sebastian felt the air thin out as the man’s nervous energies compounded, and he prepared for the man to inevitably fumble his way back into the conversation.

“I think that came out wrong.”

Sebastian didn’t answer.

“Did you hear me?”

“What?” Sebastian left an exasperated edge on his question.

“I said, ‘I think that came out wrong.’ I’m sorry.”

“That’s fine. Not the worst comment I’ve gotten.” Sebastian softened his tactic and offered a fleeting smile and forced chuckle to placate the stranger’s fretting and fulfill his social obligations. The tension in the air didn’t dissipate though.

“Yeah, I think you guys maybe got a bad rep.... Not that I agree with everything you boys did, but I don’t think of you guys like that either. I was a Vietnam Marine, so I get it.”

Fuck, thought Dent. One of the risks of choosing one of the old-timers is their overwhelming urge to connect with the younger generations and share their war stories. It’s not that Sebastian didn’t respect the Vietnam veterans; quite the contrary, actually. As a group he had nothing but respect for them. He saw their war as the last American war with a real enemy that had been trained to fight; not like his ‘war’ in Afghanistan where they were using airstrikes and artillery and night vision to fight farmers and children armed with AK-47’s and RPK’s that all had broken sights and had been inexplicably decorated with shiny, frilly plastic wrap. Not like his American war that was more slaughter than fighting.

He felt deeply for the Vietnam guys that had come home and were welcomed by throngs of protestors waiting to spit on them and call them baby-murderers. He was amazed by their resilience and how they were able to survive their combat-induced nightmares, exacerbated by their Agent Orange exposures, with zero help from the VA hospitals. He was grateful to them for going through all of that and forcing real reform around the VA so that his generation could get real treatment for their PTSD, instead of allowing it to fester as a comedic trope in pop culture. Sebastian believed all of these things about that generation. It’s just that, on an individual basis, he couldn’t connect with them because they all seemed to have something to prove to him about their service, which always led to over-embellished stories that could never stack up to reality.

“So, you were a Marine too?” The man’s eyes continued to reflect back and peer into Sebastian.

“Huh?”

“You said you were in the Marines? What was your MOS?”

“Infantry.”

“Oh really? I was infantry. Well for a while, and then I was recruited into special forces.”

“Is that so? Sounds crazy.” Sebastian mindlessly indulged the man as he stared out the window.

Yeah, we did a lot of crazy shit back then too. My platoon was actually one of the predecessors for Force Recon and we were doing mostly what you’d call ‘black ops’ mostly around the Laos border.”

Logically, Sebastian could understand why so many Vietnam guys made up stories like this; they’d been ridiculed and ignored by so many, for so long, that somewhere along the way they began to realize that their own battle traumas weren’t enough to elicit the responses that they needed. Although he understood it, it was impossible for Sebastian to find any empathy for them. He had already encountered too many stolen valor types that were so prevalent in his own generation. He had witnessed how they would theatricalize his PTSD for a little bit of unearned attention. He had seen how these displays perpetuated the most harmful veteran stereotypes and had experienced how those stereotypes economically hamstrung him and his friends in a society that fetishizes warfighters. Everyone was quick with a free beer and eager to hear stories, but all were reluctant to offer employment or long-term support, preferring instead to keep them at a healthy distance for fear that they might have a PTSD episode and violently attack everyone around them. Because of this, Sebastian had developed a natural aversion to any strangers that tried to

share unsolicited war stories with him, even if he did suspect that they could be genuine veterans.

“Yeah, did you check out that pistol that you took off of me?”

“Yeah, it’s a nice 1911.”

“I took it off of one of the new lieutenants that got shot trying to run away during a night ambush. He probably would’ve gotten fragged by one of us if the gooks didn’t get him. He was pissing himself the second he got over there, and he got us lost in the jungle seven times in the one month that he was with us.”

Sebastian picked up the pistol from the seat beside him and ran his fingers over it to acknowledge Charlie’s story and hopefully be able to direct his attention away from this excruciating conversation. He found the manufacturer’s inscription on the slide and held the pistol up for a closer inspection.

COLT ARMS MFG

MODEL 1911

Manufactured: 1998 S/N: 564837

Sebastian didn’t bother pointing out the anachronism for fear that it might push the man to desperately defend his story and lengthen this unbearable exchange.

“You said you keep it on you for the toll roads? Are they bad out here?”

“Well, I haven’t had to use it yet, but you never know. The tribes don’t really play around with that sort of thing and are usually pretty vigilant with their enforcement. I don’t normally venture out this far cause I don’t have a lot of people I can call if I get stranded this far out, but I wouldn’t be surprised to see one on the Missouri side, though. Especially in the large gaps between the big cities. If we come across one, you’re gonna need to give me that gun back cause they certainly aren’t going to like you.

“They never do. Just stick to the interstate unless I say otherwise. If there’s anything, I’ll take care of the payment and talking.

“Okay, you’re the boss.”

Charlie began to stutter and stopped. He was trying to find a tactful way to fill their empty journey with idle reflections about past deeds and misfortunes. He rarely got a toll as intriguing as Sebastian and felt compelled to uncover more about his mysterious rider. Sebastian sensed that his escort intended to continue his meaningless talk and used Charlie’s hesitation as his opportunity to put on his headphones and busy himself on the phone.

Chapter 10

Sebastian felt the avoidant anxieties growing as he approached his final destination. He was going to have to call Aaron to connect with him, but found himself nearly incapacitated by the thought of their looming reunion. He was only forty miles outside of Springfield and still hadn't mustered up the willpower to call Aaron back or, at the very least, text him an ETA. Just their brief exchange that morning was enough for his painful memories to come rushing back and Sebastian couldn't help but let himself ruminate on the sorrows that awaited him. He had been analyzing every possible catastrophe that Aaron could have waiting for him and questioned whether it was absolutely necessary for him to be there. If he went through with this, he was going to have to complete a 2000-mile journey with a guy that had once convinced him that they were brothers, but failed to prove it when he was at his most vulnerable. If Sebastian turned around and found a ride back to California, then he could still see to burying his friend and would only have to avoid Aaron at the funeral. While he couldn't trust Aaron on a personal level anymore, he did have confidence in Aaron's ability and commitment to getting Alex's corpse back to California.

Ultimately though, Sebastian knew he had already decided to join Aaron when he called him up that morning. He felt the obligation to fulfill Alex's final wishes and knew that he'd carry the burden of guilt if Aaron somehow failed to deliver. Besides, Sebastian had always known Aaron to be an abrasive type that could provoke fights with an unencumbered proficiency when confronted with the wrong types, and Sebastian believed that he could be a softer mediator that would provide their friend's final journey a higher margin for success. If not, maybe Aaron could finally pick a fight with the right people this time and get them both killed. A win-win in Sebastian's mind.

Sebastian picked up his phone and dialed Aaron. Several rings went by and part of him secretly hoped that Aaron wouldn't pick up so that he could delay the inevitable meeting. Five, six rings went by. Just as Sebastian thought he was going to make it to the voice mail prompt unscathed, Aaron picked up.

"Hello?"

"He-Hey, it's Dent, I'm..." Sebastian faltered and mumbled for a moment. His premature anticipation of the voice mail's relief had made him unprepared, and Aaron's steady voice had caught him off guard. Even his driver, who had tacitly agreed to respect Dent's silent presence had noticed the tremble in his voice and shot a concerned look at Sebastian in the rearview mirror.

"Hey Sebastian, I'm in Springfield already. Where are you at?"

"I'm about forty miles out headed east on I-44. I've got all of my gear with me so where do you want me to meet you at?"

"Wow. I didn't think you'd be able to make it out here that fast. To be honest, I'm running a little bit behind on everything here. You got a car or what's your transportation situation look like?"

"I flew into Vance Airforce Base outside of Oklahoma City and caught a ride with a local driver, but I'm trying to cut him loose so that he can head home tonight. You got an address where I can meet you at?"

"Ok yeah, I've got Postata's truck which I was planning on using to take him to Cali, but I still have some boxes to check off and people to check in with at the police station. You want to meet me there?"

"How do you have his truck? Isn't it evidence?"

Aaron let out a breathy chuckle, "Nah, I made some calls and changed his registration to my name before they got around to towing it off the parking lot, so it's ours now."

“Ok, but I’ve got a full kit with me here; I’m not really sure we should be pushing it by unloading a bunch of conspicuous gear into a truck connected to a murder investigation in front of the police station.”

“Well, it’s not really like that. Things have been going pretty smoothly and the only resistance I’m running into is getting Alex’s body released. I think we know the right people here and the cops are willing to looking the other way for reasonable prices. But I’m picking up what you’re putting down. There’s a Denny’s down the block from the station. I’ll park his truck behind the restaurant for you to unload everything while I’m at the station.”

“Ok that works for me. Send me the address and I should be there within an hour or so.”

“Ok sounds good.”

Sebastian hung up and addressed the unwelcome eyes staring at him in the mirror. His driver quickly looked away from his violation of their unspoken agreement.

Chapter 11

Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit.

Father into your hands.

Why have you forsaken Me?

In your eyes forsaken Me?

In your thoughts forsaken Me?

In your heart forsaken Me?

“That’s a hit.”

Sebastian didn’t need Aaron’s confirmation. The shot felt just as good as the last three.

Forty fucking minutes. Sebastian reached to feel the heat of the barrel. All it took was forty minutes to zero his primary weapon and a brand-new, out-of-the-box AR-15 at the newly constructed Ben Avery Range in northern Phoenix. Forty fucking minutes is all it would have taken for Aaron to prove it to Sebastian. Forty fucking minutes.

Sebastian had decided to trade in his Kel-tec RFB rifle and Benelli 828U shotgun for a new AR-15 and ACOG optic. Although he had always been fascinated by the rifle’s bull-pup design and enhanced ergonomics that it allowed for, he didn’t really mind giving up the Kel-tec. He had only taken it to the range twice and quickly discovered that 1) the design required significant sacrifices in functionality, specifically around the bolt and receiver where access to the chamber was only available from the magazine-well, making it nearly impossible to clear a jam unless the user was willing to do a quick field-strip, assuming the rifle could accommodate that with a jam; 2) this lack of access to the chamber also made weapon safety an issue, as it was impossible to check if you had a round in the chamber without removing the magazine; and 3) the tube that paralleled the barrel where the brass was forward-ejected from tended to stockpile spent brass unless the rifle was tilted

downwards below the horizontal plane after each burst to allow gravity to help clear the pileup.

Kel-tec was also not known for their precision machining, which only exacerbated the design's proclivity for jams. They opted to go for cheaper, mass-production milling techniques which they marketed as a feature of the guns, arguing that it provided more forgiveness and allowed the gun to take a beating and still continue operating, much like the reliability of an AK-47 that could be buried in the peanut-butter-mud of the Philippine jungles for months and come out firing a full clip without so much as a ground slam of the buttstock to clear the excess mud. While it was true that Kel-tec parts were more durable and could theoretically operate under more trying conditions, this wasn't a feature like what was found with the AK-47. Even after two full cleanings, a deep soak of the disassembled gun in the solution bath, and three thorough lubrications with CLP, the gun still ground like a transmission full of sand whenever it completed a cycle of operations. Sure, the gun could take a beating, but it required a manhandling just to rack a round. And the rough, fractioned movements of the bolt prompted an unreliable and choppy cycle that often compounded with the gun's design to cause at least one jam per magazine.

The Benelli 828U fell on the other end of the impracticality spectrum, but Sebastian had sensed much more distress when deciding to trade it in for the \$3000 ACOG. It was a beautiful over-under shotgun chambered in 12-ga, 2 $\frac{3}{4}$ " and 3" shells. It was one of the few splurges that Sebastian had allowed for himself as a gift for his thirty-second birthday. The stock and handguard were finished in a rich satin walnut, and the buttstock housed a practically magic compression system that made it appear to be a solid, static piece but absorbed the brunt of the shell's power to reduce the kick to a barely noticeable nudge. The receiver was finished with a sheened nickel-plating with geometric intricacies precision-etched into

it. The paper-thin barrels were blued in a delicately silky finish that always made Sebastian fully-aware of his actions when handling it, lest a mindless error should scrape it against a wall or rock that could easily work flaws into it. The top barrel was crested by a simple, sleek line buttressed by minimalist supports and hosted a fiberoptic red dot at the explosive end that naturally guided the shooter's eye to the target. Sebastian's favorite part of the shotgun was the action, though. Every piece fit within a micrometer of tolerance and glided like butter as they moved in synch to eject their spent shells whenever Sebastian's right thumb flicked the action lever; and they frictionlessly tucked themselves back into a seamless puzzle when his left hand gently lifted the featherweight barrels to close the reloaded action. Just below the action lever, was the ingeniously designed button that housed the barrel selector and safety with a perfect placement for an almost intuitive resistance. The final control that released the weapon's perfectly centered firing pins, the dual-trigger, was even more responsive and only required 4.4 lbs. of pull to activate. It was truly a work of art and Sebastian only felt comfortable taking it out for the trap-shooting circuit on the south side of the range. Even the thought of exposing it to humidity levels above those of its native Sonoran Desert made Sebastian uneasy.

Sebastian had opted to trade in his two most impractical weapons for something much more standard, a Colt M4 carbine, otherwise commonly referred to as an AR-15 in America. That was the cheap part. The real cost was in the ACOG optic that was five times as expensive as the rifle. All good glass was expensive, but Trijicon was able to demand an extreme premium for their optics because they'd become the standard sights for Marine Corps and special forces rifles. That familiarity was one of the two main reasons Sebastian had decided to trade in his second favorite gun to acquire the

weapon system. The second reason was the widespread availability of 5.56/.223 rounds that powered the AR-15.

An additional feature of the ACOG was its engineered simplicity. The top of it was striped with a line of tritium that absorbed the sun's light and focused it into a radioactive red chevron capping a reticle tree that gave it an effective range of 600 meters. This feature allowed the optic to be partially illuminated without the need for a battery. Its simple but hardy design is what made it a natural choice for the Marine Corps and, in between zeroing rounds for Sebastian's primary weapon, the two Marines had fully zeroed Dent's alternate weapon in less than twenty rounds. All they had to do was set up an oversized target at a 36-yard distance and Sebastian got in the prone with the dial covers unscrewed to expose his windage and elevation adjustments. With each shot, Aaron would take his flathead screwdriver and make lateral and vertical corrections; first, he would make large adjustments with dozens of clicks at a time until Sebastian came within an inch of the center of the target where his adjustments became much more deliberate and measured in sets of three and five. By the twelfth round, the clicks had been reduced to titrating one's and two's. Sebastian verified the zeroing by popping off the remainder of the magazine at the three-hundred-meter range on their way to the five-hundred- and thousand-meter ranges, where they would finish zeroing his primary weapon.

"Well, that's five consecutive in the black." Aaron looked up from his oversized spotter's scope set up on the bench behind the shooter line. Sebastian continued to lay behind his rifle as his shooter hand gently stroked the jet-black ridges of the hardened steel that extended out from his shoulder and allowed him to reach out and touch targets up to a kilometer away.

"I think you got it. How do you feel? Comfortable or do you want to take some more shots?"

“No, I’m good. Let’s get going.” Sebastian felt really good. He felt confident, capable. The farthest he had pushed himself to shoot the rifle was only five hundred meters; that was the maximum distance that the 180 grain Norma match-grade ammo still maintained a velocity powerful enough to take down the elk he had bought an end-of-season tag for to make up for his failed hunt.

“You sure? You don’t want to play horse on the steels?”

“No, I don’t want to play fucking horse on the steels!” Sebastian reflexively snapped off his defense, but the truth was that he had always wanted a chance to shoot the iron gongs set up at the end of the line with Aaron and witness just how skillful a Marine Corps sniper could be with a rifle.

“What’s your problem, Sebastian?” Aaron maintained his military bearing to not attract the attention of the range safety officer (RSO) smoking a cigarette outside the entrance to the firing line.

“Why couldn’t you be bothered to help me with my shooting before now?”

“Sebastian, what are you talking about? I let you use my rifle to go on that hunt of yours!”

“And what the fuck was I supposed to do with that god damn spaceship of yours?” Sebastian’s muted hiss indicated that he was also aware of the RSO at the end of the line. “You handed me this rifle that was impossible to zero and you just couldn’t be bothered to help me with it.”

“What are you talking about!?” Aaron was getting irritated.

“That was a twelve-thousand-dollar rifle built exactly to sniper team specs and I let you take it out because you’d left your guns at your parents’ house and you were too afraid to go and get them.”

“Being avoidant isn’t the same as being fearful.” Sebastian fortified against Aaron’s trivializations. “And you handed me this fucking mobius cube with a sight that had apparently been installed in a hyperbaric chamber cause it didn’t respond to normal corrections! How many fucking times did I tell you that I needed you to come to the range with me and work on it before my hunt? And all you would say is ‘scope dope, get your scope dope, scope dope, scope dope, scope dope!’ What the fuck does ‘scope dope’ even mean, Aaron?!”

“And I came out and helped you!”

“Four days before the hunt! And you didn’t even help me! You just sat there and watched me pop off six rounds before telling me it was broken and needed to be taken to an armorer; when it was too late to find a replacement rifle! You know that was a once-in-a-lifetime hunt, right? And all I wanted was one fucking weekend to spend hunting with you. I asked you three months in advance to go with me and you didn’t even pretend to try. You just said ‘no’! What were you doing that was so important?”

“Sebastian, I was recovering from my divorce.” Aaron’s tone softened as Delilah’s painful memories siphoned off his strength. “I was sleeping twenty hours a day. I could barely wipe my own ass.”

“I know! I was there! Who do you think stocked the fridge? Who do you think was doing your laundry and cleaning out the dirty dishes from that little rat nest of yours?!”

“I know it was you, Sebastian. I never said you didn’t do any of that. But why are you so upset? You were fully aware of the situation you were walking into.”

“So what?!”

“So why do you keep holding that against me?”

“Because you talked to me like I was family! You said I was your brother! You said you loved me! You could have never recovered, and I would have cared for you indefinitely if you could have just let me believe that!”

“Sebastian, you are my family.”

“Not like *her*.” Sebastian stiffened against Katrina’s venomous memories.

“What do you want from me? She’s my sister.”

“And what did I have to do to be your brother?!”

“Sebastian, what are you talking about?!”

“I couldn’t get you to do one fucking thing with me, but *she* would return home from tormenting another boyfriend and you could spend entire weeks doing exactly what she wanted – escorting her to bars, building her new contraptions, playing her shitty games...Do you know how many times I had to put the garage back together after you tore it apart looking for another expensive toy of yours to pawn off and give her the proceeds? While you were asking me for loans to support yourself?!”

“Sebastian, SHE IS MY SISTER.” Aaron was losing his patience having to passively defend on the firing line.

“And what did she do to deserve that? When I arrived, Delilah’s dogs were shit-covered disasters caged in the corner because you didn’t even have the capacity to care for yourself! And Katrina was there! The whole time! But she couldn’t be bothered to care for anything outside of herself! How long did you let her live in that Arizona house rent-free? Five, six years?!”

“She was doing me a favor and taking care of the house.”

“And what about after your divorce!? We had multiple conversations about how your finances were drowning and

every time you would admit that you'd be able to support yourself if she and her boyfriends would just contribute rent. You were living in that house and didn't need a house-sitter, so why did she get to continue to not only live rent-free, but get to keep squeezing you for everything you were worth?"

"Sebastian that's not true. It wasn't like that."

"Oh yeah?! And where the fuck is your Raptor, Aaron?"

"I sold it to take care of myself! So I didn't have to keep asking you for money!"

"Aaron! That truck was easily \$80,000 with all of the aftermarket parts. And you were asking me for more money within two months of selling it! I know that you sold it to take care of her credit card debts. I'm not fucking stupid! I just want to know what she did to deserve that!"

"Dent, she loved me! And I couldn't lose that love!"

"That isn't love Morson! Over and over, I had to listen to her talk shit about how you weren't the same badass after Delilah had eviscerated you. And you just took it and continued to try and make her happy. You know how painful it was for me to listen to you plan felonies against ex-boyfriends that she had perceived slights against? You know how difficult it was to watch you give every last bit of yourself to her while I gave everything of myself to protect you?"

"If you understand love so much, then why can't you understand I was willing to do anything to protect her?"

"Because it isn't fucking love! It's infatuation! She got everything from you when I couldn't even get you to watch a movie with me or help me around the house! And every time she'd leave, you would just crawl back into your little hole and sleep for days at a time, only waking up to eat my food and

smoke my weed and pick fights with me in incoherent ramblings.”

“Ok I can’t reason with you when your jealousy takes hold like this, Sebastian.”

“IT’S NOT FUCKING JEALOUSY!” Damn the RSO alerted to the confrontation. “I JUST WANT TO KNOW WHAT I HAD TO DO TO GET JUST A PIECE OF THAT!” The RSO quickly paced towards the commotion as the single shooter behind him cleared his weapon and stepped back from the line. “Multiple times I asked y’all if you were serious about my proposed plan and every fucking time both of y’all assured me that you were committed! Why did you let me risk everything when you knew she wasn’t going to commit to anything that failed to meet her immediate needs? Why was that stupid bitch worth so much more than me?”

“DENT! THAT’S ENOUGH!”

“Hey gents, I’m going have to ask the two of you to leave. We can’t have fighting on the firing line.” The RSO kept his hand raised just off his hip, ready to draw his open carry in case the standoff escalated.

“Yes sir. Understood.”

“Yes sir. I’m condition four,” Dent held out his rifle with the bolt pulled back for the RSO’s inspection, “but I still need to pack up. Aaron, you want to wait at the car?”

Both showed sincere contrition for their transgression. Neither wanted to risk excommunication from the range.

“All right. I’m not going to write you up this time, but I’m going to keep an eye out for you two.”

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to come back together.”

Dent purposefully moved from the firing line as Aaron picked up his spotter scope and quietly stormed off. Dent set the rifle

down on the bench, knocked out the rear take-down pin to hinge the lower receiver, removed the bolt and quickly wiped it down with another coat of lubricant before reassembling the rifle and returning it to its case.

This was his favorite gun. He had spent weeks researching .308's and, after extensive deliberations, had decided to go with an AR-10 platform instead of building out a Remington 700 bolt-action, mostly due to his limited capabilities. He had originally tried to find the DPMS RePR, but after weeks of failing to find one in the stores and on the gun-broker sites, he had decided to settle on its predecessor, the Gen II Semi-Auto Sniper System, or G2 SASS. It was a natural choice for Sebastian's Marine sensibilities and the free-floating heavy barrel proved to be extra forgiving for Sebastian's tremors. His favorite part of the rifle, though, was the simple hand rest at the bottom of the pistol grip that allowed him to focus his hand's excess energies downwards into a stabilizing force that coupled with gravity. And the upgraded Atlas bipods further enhanced that stability.

Resting on top of the rifle was one of Leupold's most capable optics, a Mark 5HD 7-35x56, with a decluttered reticle graded under the more sensible metric system. Whenever someone asked him how much it cost, he'd always get embarrassed and give the price after Leupold's 45% veteran's discount was applied. He slipped a taut neoprene sleeve onto the oversized optic before gently laying the weapon into the impression that was custom cut into the case's protective foam.

Everything about the rifle was chosen with intention to make Sebastian even more capable, which is what also made it his most hated gun. He had bought it as a consolation prize to replace the White Sands Oryx he never got the chance to harvest with Aaron. He bought it so that he'd never have to rely on Aaron or anyone else again. But what good was this rifle if he was never going to have anyone to go shooting or hunting

with him? What good was any of it if he was just always going to be by himself?

*Trust in my self-righteous Suicide.
I [too] cry when angels deserve to die.
In my self-righteous suicide,
I cry when angels deserve to die.*

Chapter 12

*Such a lonely day, and it's mine.
The most loneliest day of my life.
Such a lonely day, should be banned.
It's a day that I can't stand.*

The pump at the Picacho Peak gas station snapped off and Sebastian pulled it from the gas tank and returned it to its holster. He held and rubbed the ache in his right hand, pushing around the swollen pocket encapsulating the knuckle that had been knocked loose from punching his walls that morning. He stretched and fisted the affected hand and watched the excess fluid bend and give to the stretches and folds.

"How's the hand? You break anything?" Aaron walked up with a bag of junk food for the road.

"No. It feels like it's just a swollen knuckle. You good to go?"

"Yep. Fully stocked up on poge-bait." Aaron held up his haul with an uneasy smile meant to ease the tensions they had tried to leave behind on the range. The only authorized communications between them had been reserved for planning their stops. Neither dared to defile the silence during the first half of the drive between Phoenix and Tucson.

Sebastian mechanically opened the driver door, "Ok let's get going then." Aaron mirrored his movement into the passenger seat and sat in silence as the car pulled out onto the empty service road that funneled onto I-10 East.

"Sebastian, we need to talk about what happened if we're going to trust each other enough to be an effective team."

Dent sighed. "We already talked about it. Nothing has changed about how I feel." He knew there was no use in reasoning with Morson, not when it came to Katrina; and there was no

reasoning with Dent, not when it came to matters of protecting Sebastian.

“Well maybe I can be a little more open-minded now that Katrina is gone.”

“Aaron.” Dent looked to the left as he cleared the onramp. His eyes left the road and returned to silently communicate his knowing disbelief to his passenger.

“Sebastian, just try. This is important.”

“Do you even remember the day I kicked you out? Cause I don’t know what you were on, but you were completely incoherent those last couple of months.”

Aaron frowned. He never appreciated Sebastian’s sober recounting of events; just because Sebastian avoided Aaron’s heavier narcotics didn’t necessarily mean that he wasn’t under the influence; his wrath was a consuming force that Sebastian was constantly relapsing on. Aaron also suspected that Sebastian exaggerated most of his stories to meet his narrational needs. He hadn’t found a way to explain that to Sebastian yet without activating his borderline rage, though.

“Yes, I remember, Sebastian.” His voice was irritated. “It was the day I moved Katrina out to LA.”

“Do you remember anything else important about that day?!”

“Just tell me what you’re getting at, Sebastian.”

“It was my fucking birthday, Aaron!”

“You said that you didn’t want to do anything for your birthday!”

“I said that I wasn’t going to be capable of going out! I told you it was the one day of the year that I dread! For weeks I told you it was going to be a super shitty day for me! It’s the one day of the year that my family finds me and uses it as an excuse to

torment me. I thought that you of all people would be able to understand that!" The angry trembling began to infect Sebastian's voice. "And what did you do?! You used that as an excuse to fuck off on another 'adventure' with Katrina and leave me behind to deal with all your bullshit!"

"Sebastian, I was moving her out to LA! I thought that's what you wanted? And what bullshit are you talking about? Watching my dogs? What about that mess you left in the front yard?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?!"

"What!?"

"The fucking water main burst! The water main you convinced me to let you take care of in lieu of rent. The water main you let sit exposed to the elements for three fucking months. I had to pay another \$1400 for an emergency plumber to fix a problem that wouldn't have existed if I could have gotten you to do one fucking thing for me!"

"That's what this is about? \$1400?! I'll pay you back right now. Let's go find an ATM."

"No! That's not what it's about! I knew you wouldn't fucking get it!"

"Then fucking explain it, Sebastian! How many times have I told you that I'm completely inept with these social cues?"

"Don't play dumb, Aaron." Sebastian's voice already began to soften as he resigned himself to the well-worn belief that he'd never be heard. "You're the smartest guy that I've ever met, and I know you're completely capable of understanding. Even if you were on the farthest end of the spectrum, you'd still be able to figure it out."

"So what? Is this about Katrina?"

"No!...I mean...What the fuck does she have on you?"

“How many times do I have to tell you this?! She’s my sister and I will always take care of her.”

“And what did I have to do to join your family?! I bought that house to take care of you. When you asked me to include Katrina, I obliged! When you needed...”

“Sebastian, I told you not to throw that house in my face! I told you that you didn’t have to buy it before you moved out to Arizona!”

“NO! You don’t get to pretend like my sacrifice meant nothing! You may not have pressured me into buying it, but you knew well and good what it was for! And you put up no resistance and let me continue to believe that I was helping you! I didn’t just buy it on a whim. It took months to find and buy that house and you didn’t say word fucking one or try to stop me the entire time!”

“Sebastian,” Aaron was getting exhausted of the same tired argument, “you were expecting too much from me and I’m tired of you using that house against me. You made the decision to buy it. You didn’t have to; I could have survived if you didn’t.”

“I’m aware that I’m responsible for my actions, Aaron! I’m just waiting for you to take your share of responsibility for your bullshit! You think I needed a two-thousand square-foot house for myself?! You knew I was buying it to accommodate Delilah’s dogs, and I even started looking for bigger places after you requested it for Katrina! And what would you have done if I didn’t buy that house? Your credit score was in the trash and all of the equity in your Phoenix house was leveraged to hell against your mounting debts from your unsustainable support of Katrina. You would’ve been on the fucking streets within six months if I hadn’t come and you know it! And none of your so-called family was coming to your rescue!”

“SO WHAT SEBASTIAN?!” The abused street-orphan detached from Morson’s control. “You think I’m afraid of being homeless! That’s my territory! I DIDN’T NEED YOUR FUCKING HELP AND I NEVER WOULD HAVE ACCEPTED IT IF I KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO HOLD IT AGAINST ME LIKE THIS!”

Sebastian stared ahead at the road. His expression was silent. They were both right and he knew it. Sebastian hated that his most selfless act had been perverted into a symbol of one of his most bitter resentments. He had never meant to leverage the house against Aaron’s love. He had bought it because he believed that he could see Aaron for who he was and believed that Aaron deserved a respite from the crushing existence thrust upon him.

Aaron wasn’t exaggerating when he said he wasn’t afraid of the streets. Sebastian loved listening the stories about the child that would be prostituted out to feed his mother’s drug habit or the eight-year-old that would voluntarily pleasure the neighborhood patriarch just for scavenging rights to feed his orphaned siblings soggy cardboard and moldy scraps from the dumpster at the end of the street. The incomprehensible darkness of the stories would make them unpalatable to nearly all, but Aaron’s gift for storytelling gave them a lightness and humor that delighted Sebastian and always prompted him to ask for more.

More than the storytelling, though, Sebastian loved the hero of the stories. The child that had already lost everything and continued to endure more just to offer what little protection and love he had to his shivering siblings. He was so similar to the hero in Sebastian’s fantastical fictions, a form that Sebastian had never managed to manifest as a child. A child that could stand against the adults that took everything from the children in their charge. And when Sebastian related to his stories, Aaron wouldn’t brush him aside, he’d build on them to bring Sebastian in closer to the story.

Sebastian had only dared to share a portion of his experiences with Aaron, though, always diligent in withholding the details that uncovered his shames. The shame of his failure to protect Levi. The shame of his cowardice. The unspeakable shames that weren't his fault but continued to haunt him. Shames that he would have to carry within to protect himself and others.

Yes, Sebastian had bought the house out of love for Aaron, but he could also recognize that his intentions weren't pure. He knew his guilt for Levi had been a significant part of his inspiration for buying the house; that if he could just care for Aaron in that moment, then he'd be able to validate some of Levi's suffering and give meaning to it. He could also recognize the part of him that had hoped it would be a home capable of housing his chosen family. He knew it was unfair for him to expect to be able to buy his way into Aaron's family, but Aaron had freely addressed Sebastian with the highest title of 'Brother' and Sebastian couldn't believe that something so sacred could be given so cheaply. He had to prove himself worthy of that veneration.

They were both right, but Sebastian knew that he couldn't admit that when Aaron wasn't willing to. A lifetime of the prisoner's dilemma had taught him that nobody was truly isolated enough to cooperate with him, and he was done allowing others to win just because he was desperate to believe. The worst part about the game wasn't the betrayal, though; he understood survival instincts. The worst part was the fact that, even if they cooperated, they were still going to be prisoners. The wardens that imprisoned them would get to keep drawing a salary and maintain their parasitic existence. The architects of the game were still going to get to sit outside and collect their profits, thriving off of those that had the least to give.

"You know why she had to leave on that Wednesday?! Why couldn't it wait until Friday when I could have been available to

help? Why she couldn't have stayed until Monday to stay and spend one last weekend with us?"

"She was excited to move in with her new boyfriend."

"No." Sebastian's voice hardened. "It's so she wouldn't have to pay rent. Because if she waited until Monday, that would have been a full thirty days, but in her self-absorbed mind, if she left four days before the full month was up, she wouldn't owe anything in rent. Fuck all of the months I gave her for free because you were still recovering from your divorce and couldn't pay for yourself. Fuck me for subsidizing her bullshit and charging her a monthly rent that was below costs."

"Is this about money or not?! Let's find an ATM and I'll pay you that rent!"

"FUCK MORSON! IT'S NOT ABOUT THE FUCKING MONEY! Six hundred and fifty dollars to get that self-absorbed cunt out of my life is the best deal I've ever made!"

"Dent stop!" Morson sniped out.

"NO! YOU TOLD ME TO GIVE HER EVERYTHING! I WANT TO KNOW WHY!" Aaron could feel the little hybrid motor whine as it struggled to accelerate under Dent's demanding foot. "You let her take my love from you! And you let her reduce it to what?! One more month of free rent!? You let her take everything away from me when you had nothing left to give yourself!"

"Sebastian, she was the first person to love me back." Sebastian despised the sincerity in Aaron's voice. "She's my sister. I told her I'd never let anything happen to her."

"And you convinced me that I was your brother!" Sebastian's tears clarified his vision. "I carried you when all you could do was survive. And I was glad to help you! I didn't care what it cost! I didn't care if you'd never be able to pay me back again!"

The car's speedometer read 92 MPH. The first semi was clear on the left.

"DENT STOP!" Morson pulled out his poorly concealed .40 cal pistol.

"NO! YOU TOLD ME TO DIE FOR HER! YOU'RE GOING TO TELL ME WHY!" They reached a cruising speed of 104 MPH as the desert's shifting erosions caved the Arizona speedways into gentle bends that lifted them skywards. "Do you know what I did for the rest of my birthday?!?"

"No. I don't." Aaron lowered his pistol and focused his face to listen. The car reached a full 124 MPH as Sebastian spilt the last of his bitter resource.

"OK Google."

The digital assistant's audio cue alerted.

"Play Aaron's voicemail."

"Playing Aaron voicemails; First voicemail dated November 10, 2020, Time 4:30 p.m. mountain standard time." The digital assistant's measured cadence drew a tensed truce in the heated combat zone. It didn't belong.

"Hey *SEBASTIAN* it's Aaron. Call me back. I'm coming back to pick up Bowser. He can't be around you when you're like this."

"What? It's true?" Aaron showed no remorse as Sebastian turned his empty face to communicate the sense of tired defeat he'd never heard a word for. He hated that Aaron always painted his anger as a problem for Delilah's emotionally abused animals, especially when he had been the only one willing to care for them.

Aaron's unapologetic voice resurfaced over the speakers.

"....Yeah he loves hearing my stories; I'm about to make him one if he's not careful, though."

Katrina's poisonous perfume reeked in their nostrils as her vicious voice squealed in delight at Aaron's reassurance. It wouldn't have mattered if the phone had hung up when Aaron told it to; he had already provided the last datum Sebastian needed to complete his year-long experiment.

"Sebastian, I ... " Dent's exhausted eyes sifted through Aaron's signaling. 124 MPH.

"I played this over and over all night as I sat in my room," Sebastian pulled out the loaded Smith & Wesson Airlite PD .44 Magnum holstered in a cross-draw configuration on his left hip, "with this stupid fucking revolver in and out of my mouth." Sebastian's last salted drops sputtered out.

"Sebastian, I'm sorry." Aaron stalled to admit what he had already seen. "You didn't bring your guns to Scottsdale because you're selling the house, did you?" Aaron sorted through his Spotify app until he found what he was looking for. The song's soft intro trembled lower as Aaron adjusted the radio's settings.

Such a lonely Day. And It's Mine

The most loneliest day of my Li-iiife

"No. I just never thought I'd have to experience a birthday worse than.....worse than my seventh. But you showed me something I'd been searching for just to withhold it from me. That hurt so much worse than anything *he* could have done."

The most loneliest Day of my life. The most loneliest Day of my life. It's a Day that I'll never miss.

"Sebastian, I don't care what the circumstances are. If you're going out, I want to be there with you. I don't want you to go out alone." The car glided into ninety as Aaron's soprano soared out over the mournful vocals. *"AND IF YOU GO, I WANT*

*TO GO WITH YOU! AND IF YOU DIE, I WANT TO DIE WITH YOU!
TAKE YOUR HAND AND WALK AWAAAAY!!!*" The car continued
decelerating to seventy as it approached the offramp.

Sebastian parked on the ramp's shoulder and got out to take a
seat on the car's trunk and appreciate the last rays of the
Arizona sun softening the hardened landscape. He felt heard.
He felt understood. He felt loved.

*Such a lonely Day,
and it's mine.*

Chapter 13

The beat-up Subaru pulled into the Denny's parking lot Aaron had sent Sebastian to just as dusk was setting in. Postata's old Ford F-150 somehow looked just as pristine as the day he drove it into their barracks parking lot nearly 15 years ago. Alex always had been meticulous about maintaining his toys, but how he managed to keep his truck in mint condition throughout the war was almost beyond belief. *He really was dedicated to this fucking truck* Sebastian thought.

Sebastian got out of his ride and immediately began unloading his gear into the truck bed. Although he had already gone through the mental checklist of all his gear as he was unloading it, he double-checked the empty cargo hold and rear seats for any remaining gear, out of force of habit. Fully satisfied with his inspection, he closed the rear hatch and walked up to the passenger door. He took out the driver's pistol, unloaded it, and placed it on the seat.

"Thank you for obliging and letting me hold onto this. As for payment, we settled on two centicoins for the trip? Are you still good with that or do you need cash?"

"No. Coin is good for me. Less risky."

At some point during the war, someone had coded an open-source app to allow users to transfer digital currencies and all it cost was a microcoin for each transaction. Because of the ease of use, availability of cryptocurrencies, and their relative stability compared to the U.S. dollar, trading of the most legitimate cryptocurrencies on the Cointric app had become the de-facto form of payment across the country. Apple and Google had tried to cash in on this trend and develop their own apps for digital currency transfers, but they had lost the public's trust when it came to light that they had fully cooperated with the U.S. government and provided access to any and all relevant user information connected to "wartime financial activities".

This roughly translated into Silicone Valley corrupting into civilian arms of the NSA and purveyors of the revived Patriot Act. Unsurprisingly, it turns out that corporate ethics disappear when the world's most profitable market is cannibalizing itself and companies will do anything to stop the bleeding and maintain their profits. Their PR teams tried to spin it as helping to end the violence, but everyone understood that it was about their bottom line. Not that it would have mattered, though, because nobody had the disposable income to waste on things like their ambitious 3% transaction fees anymore.

Dent pulled up his app and tapped his phone to the driver's. The driver looked at his phone to confirm the transaction and was met with a pleasant surprise.

"Hey I think you hit the wrong number here. I got three centicoins showing on the transfer."

"No, I meant to do that. I appreciate you getting me here without any complications and we arrived pretty late so this should cover a hotel for you to stay the night and have a safe trip in the morning. And this is in case you come across any toll roads."

Sebastian handed the driver a hefty wad of fifty-dollar bills that felt to be about a thousand dollars worth.

"Wow. I didn't know you guys were this generous. Let me know if you need anything else from me!"

"That's ok. Your discretion was more than enough. I appreciate your help, Marine."

Sebastian was always generous when it came to services like this. It also didn't hurt to play the "esprit de corps" angle with this man that clearly just wanted an acknowledgement from a younger warfighter. He had found that by validating that itch, these guys would typically construct their own connection to you, with the resulting loyalty being very useful for maintaining

a shroud of concealment on trips like this one. Not that Sebastian suspected anyone was tracking him, but the laws and jurisdictions had become much more fluid since the war, especially in the interior parts of the country, and it was always a good idea to maintain a low profile.

Dent waved goodbye to his driver and walked over to his friend's old truck. He pulled the tailgate down and proceeded to wait for Aaron who was supposedly still at the police station. Several hours went by. And he began to consider texting Aaron to make sure everything was still going smoothly, but each time he raised his phone, he would decide not to, opting to give another twenty minutes instead. Aaron was never that great at tracking time and was known to get lost in hours-long conversations with strangers, due to his natural charisma and encyclopedic knowledge on almost any topic anyone could possibly want to talk about. These abilities are what made Sebastian feel an instant connection with Aaron as they used to get lost in their own deep conversations that could make him forget his sorrows and begin to dream in new realities. Now, Sebastian was hoping that Aaron's gift of conversation would keep him away as long as possible so that he could avoid their inevitable meeting face-to-face. Despite his aversion to seeing Aaron again, Sebastian felt a growing concern that Aaron had said one too many things and gave away some details that could jeopardize their mission. He began to worry that he was going to have to leave his guns and gear unattended in the back of Alex's truck and show his face in the police station to assist him. Just as the latter anxiety was about to overtake the former relief and force Sebastian to call, Aaron's figure appeared from around the corner of the Denny's.

Aaron was an impressive figure. With a heavy, athletic build and standing a little over six feet tall, shaved head and wild beard, shaved just enough to proudly display his crimson tattoo; the look was reminiscent of a Viking berserker always

waiting for violence. More than that, the way he carried himself made him stand out head and shoulders above anyone around him. Despite this gigantic presence, whenever he smiled or laughed, all one could see was an overgrown child comically covered in amateur prison tattoos. Sebastian was relieved when he caught sight of Aaron and couldn't help but feel a rogue smile slip out; but as quickly as it came, the smile flashed away as Sebastian remembered his need to self-protect.

Aaron wore his widest smile as he approached Sebastian sitting on the truck tailgate and held out his arms in an exaggerated expectation of a hug.

"There he is! How are you doing, Marine?"

Dent held out his hand for a fist-bump with his facial expressions fully under control.

"I'm good. Made it out here without any problems and now I'm ready to get Alex back to Cali. What's the situation here?"

Aaron was clearly miffed by Sebastian's detachment but quickly switched his greeting to meet the expectant fist and pulled his smile to match Sebastian's cues. He had hoped that a few years would be enough time for Sebastian to process everything that had happened and was even hopeful that Sebastian would be glad to see him. Sebastian's self-preservation wasn't going to allow that though.

"Yeah, sorry it took so long in there. Apparently, the couple's family hired a shitload of lawyers because they think that this is going to be their big payday and they're looking to sue anyone involved in this. They had a couple of lawyers calling the police captain all morning making all sorts of demands, and they spooked the hell out of him. So he wasn't very cooperative with me, and it took a long time and a lot of favors to get the right people to start pushing down on him. I also think that they figured out that I took Alex's truck from the Home Depot

parking lot, and he was a little butthurt about that one.” Aaron gave a childish chuckle to his mischief.

“Sooo, you got him to release Alex’s body?”

“He said he was going to give me custody of Alex but I’m not sure he was fully convinced. It could just take another phone call from the lawyers for him to change his mind and claim that he’s keeping it for ‘evidence’. We better go pick up Alex before that happens.”

The estranged pair loaded up into their brother’s truck and set out on their mission.

Chapter 14

The Mercy Hospital parking lot was surprisingly lifeless for 9:00 pm. Dent stared out across the quietly off-putting span at the ambulances standing by underneath the emergency room awning. Although the parking lot was still and presented no immediate threat to them, Dent couldn't help but feel exposed and a vague sense of impending doom creeping in. Morson's energy had been off on the drive over; maneuvering the truck in agitated motions and driving at erratic speeds. His story about getting the police captain to cooperate didn't fully add up but, then again, his stories about covert dealings and connections never had fully added up. It was usually enough to just take Aaron at his word because he was usually able to deliver results that would mostly verify his spy-thriller narratives.

What Sebastian was fearful of, he couldn't quite say. He wasn't afraid of dying; suicide had been his exit strategy since he was a child that couldn't make sense of a world controlled by his narcissistic father. He wasn't afraid of physical injury either, as he had experienced his fair share of ass-beatings in scraps where he was clearly outmatched but forced into by his righteous anger. Even his Afghanistan experiences failed to elicit any type of fear response, instead extracting an almost therapeutic dose of adrenaline to bubble outwards into the abyssal emptiness to register a surreal dream state as the bullets snapped across overhead, dropping leaves from the branches and dusting his face with the detritus kicked up in their wake, as if to taunt him with their tangible form that was never meant to find him.

Rather, it was more a vague anxiousness that gnawed away at him like a benign cancer and always seemed to be aroused whenever he was forced to operate within the shadows. Maybe it was just the deceitful nature of the actions; the potential shame that could generate if they got caught; being forced to

provide an explanation for himself to a jury of non-peers. Maybe it was the fear of going to jail where he'd lose his autonomy. He had thought about the source and nature of this fear often, as it had been a constant plague for most of his violent years, but he could never quite pin it down. All of his theories could only provide a partial solution to his question. All he knew was that life was barely tolerable as it was, and he could not, would not introduce anymore suffering into it, either for himself or anyone else.

Aaron was rummaging around in the backseat, looking for random gear that he was shoving into the open backpack in his lap. There was a laptop, a red-colored folder with disheveled papers sticking out everywhere, a tablet, two cell phones, a lanyard with some type of credentials attached to it, and two leather-bound badges. It was all just so disorganized, a prominent feature of Aaron's operating style that had always exasperated Sebastian's anxieties. Lastly, Aaron pulled out his Springfield XD .40 cal pistol from the center console, racked a round, and placed it in the holster on his belt.

"Are you sure you need that?" Sebastian asked, pointing to the pistol.

"You never know. Just in case."

"Just in case of what? I thought you said they were releasing Alex?"

"Like I said, that police captain seemed unreliable, but even if he stayed true to his word and pulled the detail guarding Alex, there's still a chance that there may be a doctor or hospital administrator that doesn't understand the situation and may give us some friction."

"Friction?"

“You know, they may not release the body for some bureaucratic reason and may need to be convinced with a little bit of posturing.”

Sebastian sighed, “Okay, you’re taking the lead here.”

Sebastian tried to keep his exasperation to himself, but his honest face could never conceal what he was thinking from Aaron. He was beginning to worry that maybe he had made a critical mistake coming out to meet Aaron and help him. Were they about to traumatize some poor nurse to fulfill the request of a dead man? Or worse, murder possible parents, siblings, or friends whose deaths would ripple through the lives of countless others? Sebastian knew this potential lurked behind every unknown, but he couldn’t question Aaron now. They were on mission and needed to work together as a unit. Introducing doubt into the situation would only decrease their effectiveness and increase the chances of one of his catastrophizations materializing. He could only join Aaron and mitigate where he could.

They stepped out of the truck and back into the crisp November night. Walking across the silent lot, they looked no more out of place than a hospital service worker or a visiting family member, but Sebastian felt countless unseen eyes watching them, judging them, and documenting everything for a future testimony.

They moved purposefully towards the rear entrance of the hospital; Sebastian a step and a half behind Aaron, looking straight ahead. The automatic doors to the emergency room entrance whooshed open and Sebastian was struck by the hospital’s deathly sweet smell that had been sanitized over with ammonia and other industrial-grade chemicals. They moved across the waiting room towards a far wall with a hospital map posted on it. Just as they were nearing the map to

find the morgue, the nurse behind the reception desk called out to them.

“Where are you two going?”

Sebastian winced at the pointed question piercing through the protective silence.

“We’re a part of the investigation team on the Alex Postata case. We were just headed to the morgue to get the results of the autopsy. Thanks for the help, though.” Aaron pivoted to turn and follow the black line on the floor leading to the elevator that would take them to the subbasement levels.

“Well wait! You still have to sign in!”

They both stopped. Sebastian could feel the uneasiness creep over him. He hated leaving traces behind.

Aaron turned partially to acknowledge the nurse without fully committing himself to her request. “Ma’am we were already in here earlier today and signed in then. We’re in a bit of a rush right now though.”

“I don’t care. You still have to sign back in.”

They cautiously approached the counter. Aaron picked up the clipboard and began filling out the requested information. He handed the clipboard back to the nurse who had become momentarily distracted with a call from a patient. Aaron guided Sebastian along with his other hand.

“I signed you in Detective Moore.”

Sebastian nodded and continued in the direction of motion without glancing back to give the nurse another opportunity to protest. He felt his hypervigilance kick in as the elevator doors casually closed before giving an uneasy lurch towards their descent. He heard his paranoia convince him that there was going to be a cop waiting for them as the elevator doors opened, followed by hospital employees hiding around each

unfamiliar corner, waiting to trip them up. Finally, they arrived at the morgue and Sebastian felt temporary relief wash over him when he espied the three vacant chairs waiting outside the refrigerated room but quickly stepped out around the hallway to make sure there weren't any hidden agents lying in wait to catch them. Every corner appeared to be vacant and the only other access point appeared to be an emergency door leading to the stairwell. Sebastian gave a confirmatory nod as he rejoined Aaron.

They entered the morgue with Sebastian silently closing the doors behind him while peering out into the hallway to make sure that no last-minute witnesses materialized behind them. Inside the morgue was cold and sterile and the smell overwhelmed them almost immediately. This must have been the source of the sickly smell that emanated throughout the hospital.

There was a tired-looking man sitting behind a dimly lit desk wearing an old, collared, cotton-knit shirt paired with some loose-fitting khaki slacks. His uniform gave a semi-professional impression, but the details – holes around the shirt's stitching, unkempt hair, a three-day-old beard stubble, and blood-stained pant cuffs – told the truth which was he was just there to do his job. Despite the temperature of the room being in the low fifties, the man had large sweat stains soaking through his shirt around his armpits and chest and had beads of sweat forming around his forehead. Behind him hung a white coat and gloves still freshly colored in crimson stains that hadn't oxidized into their dull browns yet.

Aaron walked up to the man and introduced himself.

"I'm Detective Cain and this is Detective Moore. We're here to get the autopsy report for Alex Postata and take custody of the body to release to the family."

The man behind the desk looked visibly confused and slightly irked by their rouse.

“What are you talking about? I told the detective that was in here earlier that I’d have the report prepared for him tomorrow. I just barely got done working on the body!” He pointed over into the next room where a covered body was resting on a metal prep table. “And we don’t just release the bodies to random strangers. That’s not how any of this works! You gotta send a Form-2082 with your captain’s notarized signature before we release the body into police custody instead of a transfer to a funeral home at the next-of-kin’s request.”

“Look man, we’re just as tired as you are and we’re just trying to do our jobs. This case has been a clusterfuck of screaming families and lawyers. Please just release the body so that we can go home and go to sleep.”

“Exactly! I’m not getting into the middle of some custodial dispute and losing my job over this! I’m not releasing the body without the proper paperwork and you guys would know this if you’d been through this process before. Who did you say you were again?” The man stood up and reached across his desk towards the phone to dial the security extension, but before he could, Aaron had already pulled out his pistol and held it between the phone and the mortician’s hand. The man froze. Sebastian froze. Aaron slowly raised the pistol level with the man’s face and unzipped his winter jacket to reveal his scarlet stripe across his neck.

“We’re the family of the deceased and we’re also men that don’t answer questions like that. Detective Moore, fetch me this man’s wallet and my computer out of my bag.”

Sebastian silently obeyed and pulled out the compact laptop, set it down on the desk between the two men, and opened it facing Aaron. Then he walked over behind the mortician and

retrieved his wallet from his back pocket and tossed it out on the desk next to the computer. He walked back around the desk to rejoin Aaron and await further instructions.

Aaron pulled out a driver's license from the wallet, "Detective Moore, make sure our friend here doesn't go anywhere while I find his credentials." Aaron laid the pistol on the desk before setting to his work.

Sebastian slowly pulled the gun from the desk and clasped it between his hands to rest in front of his groin. His face remained forceful, somehow not giving away his urge to reach out and console the man sitting in front of him with trembling hands awkwardly stuck in the air.

Aaron typed away on his computer for what seemed like hours to the two men engaged in their stare-down. After a few minutes, Aaron looked up from the computer and addressed the mortician.

"You are Roger Smith and you're married to Allison Clements Smith, correct?"

The man's face paled as his eyes filled with fear and focused on Aaron.

"I'll take that as a yes. So I'd be correct in assuming that Luke, age 11, and Amy, age 8, at Bowerman elementary school are also your two children then?"

Roger gave a barely perceptible nod and choked out confirmation that those were indeed his children.

"Ok Roger. Here's the situation. I have every last detail of your life pulled up here on my computer. I can do things as benign as clearing out all of your bank accounts or putting out a warrant for your arrest, or I can get real dark and start involving your family in your punishments if you choose not to cooperate

here. However, I don't believe that this is the hill that you want to die on...or your loved ones for that matter, is it?"

Roger shook his head no.

"Okay then. How long will it take you to prepare Alex's body over there for transport?"

Roger had found his ability to speak again, although it was much meeker than before, "About an hour."

"Ok then, you're going to start preparing the body immediately. If anyone walks in here during your embalming and asks who we are, you're going to collaborate our story and tell them that I am Detective Cain and my partner here's Detective Moore and that we're taking custody of the body for transport. Any attempt to expose us or thwart what's happening right now will be taken as you being uncooperative and the punishments will begin. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Okay good. And let me clarify here, your information has already been shared with our other colleagues. So, if we aren't successful here, they'll know who to come after. There's not a scenario here where you'll get the better of us without repercussions. The only way for you to come out of this unscathed is to do exactly as you're told and never tell anyone anything about what happened here tonight. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand."

"Good. Then I suggest you get to work because your hour starts now."

The mortician quickly put his hands down and scurried off to begin his embalming process. Aaron closed the laptop and turned to Sebastian.

“Ok, I need you to head back to Alex’s house. There’s a big plywood box in there that I think was one of his attempts at making his coffin.” Sebastian’s face distorted into a mix of disbelief and humor. “Yeah, it’s dark. I know. But it was Postata, what did you expect? Load the box up into the back of the truck and come back here. Stop off at a gas station and fill it up with ice while you’re at it too. His bedroom may have some sentimental stuff that you may want to look through, but I already went through most of his stuff and there didn’t appear to be much there to salvage. It looks like he’d already been preparing for this.”

“Ok so I’ll see you in an hour and fifteen?”

“Yeah. Sounds good. And I’ll take this back. You know, just in case.”

Aaron slid the pistol out of Sebastian’s hand and winked at him. Sebastian felt uneasy about leaving Aaron alone with the mortician, but it’s not like keeping his pistol from him was going to hinder any of his potential violence.

Chapter 15

Everything was dead quiet in Alex's old neighborhood when Sebastian crawled into the driveway. A few porch lights scattered through the street emitted a warm glow into the empty night; enough to give one a perspective of depth but not enough to provide meaningful navigation. The only sound that remained after the low rumble of the truck's idling engine ceased was two distant dogs having their usual dispute over territorial boundaries.

He stepped out of the truck and approached the front door, quickly ducking under the police tape cordoning off the house. He stepped inside and turned on the living room light to find the disheveled hovel of a man that had given up. The most prominent feature of the room was a large, expensive TV hanging on the wall. Opposite the TV was a worn-out convertible sofa sitting in front of an old workshop bench that was being used as a dinner table, general purpose space, and tool storage. Shoved in the corner was an oversized wood desk that Sebastian suspected had been salvaged from a street curb. Covering the desk was months' worth of mail, some opened, but mostly untouched.

Sebastian moved into the kitchen to find more of the same. The cabinets and drawers were empty and the meager stock of plates and bowls and complementing silverware appeared to have taken permanent residence in the sinks. Inside the fridge there was just the essentials – some eggs, the fixings for ham and cheese sandwiches, some yogurt and a few sodas. Sebastian pulled out a can and closed the fridge. The taught “snap” of the can brought his reality into focus and Sebastian began to fully realize the last few months of his friend's life.

Aaron was right, Alex had been preparing and waiting for his end. Sebastian had suspected that others were beginning to detach themselves as the Decimations had begun to take their

toll, but he had been so lost in his own mind that he had lost track of the others and time. Sebastian began to realize that his own detachment had blinded him to the suffering of those closest to him. Alex was one of the few that Sebastian had kept in contact with, but a handful of phone calls throughout the year was hardly enough to convince himself that he had been a good enough friend to alleviate his guilt. He thought about Alex's loneliness and how it must have been painfully similar to his own. He thought about how he could have made other arrangements and could have come out here to wait out Alex's final days with him. Sure, they would've remained isolated from the world, but at least they could lick each other's wounds as they withdrew into the woods to follow the natural order.

Sebastian peered into his own future and knew that it held similar fortunes. He wouldn't have anyone left to carry his body to his final resting point when his day came. He saw that he was already living as a ghost in his own corner of the world and that his life was just a repetition of the same maladaptive patterns used to keep him protected from the world. As tears began rolling down his cheeks, he became fearful that his own suffering would become too much and leach out and spread to others, much like Alex's had.

Sebastian wiped away the loose tears and returned to the moment and task at hand. He went into the garage and found Alex's crude coffin that Aaron had requested. It looked like a child's unsupervised attempt at building a fort – scrapwood that had been crudely sawn apart and nailed back together, with some of the edges retaining their straight factory cuts, but on the sides that Alex had sawn away at, long, sinusoidal waves replaced the linear edges; along these edges, long sinuous bands of light crept out, revealing the gaps that were up to a half-inch-thick along seams that were supposed to be flush. The box's door was hinged with some old fencing hardware with their fastening screws poking outwards from the box. The lid

was secured by a simple latch that also appeared to have been ripped from a fence. Filling the inside were wood scraps from Alex's other failed projects. Sebastian couldn't help but smile and laugh thinking about his friend's frustrated reactions during these projects. He dumped out the contents of the box and squatted down to load it into the truck. Intending to lean it on the tailgate and slide it in headfirst, Sebastian lifted it to stand on the feet when the sides began to fold inwards on themselves, testing the tensile strength of the nails flexing to hold it all together. Again, Sebastian couldn't help but to laugh as he bear-hugged the entire box and gingerly laid it flat into the bed.

Tucked away in the corner of the garage were six red gas tanks. Sebastian loaded five of them in a flush arrangement between the coffin and bed walls.

He made his way inside again to sweep the house and search for anything of use. He did another cursory once-over of the kitchen and living room before going into the master bedroom. In the corner Alex's gun safe had been tipped over and the door pried open with a crowbar. The inside had been cleared out, but by who, Sebastian couldn't say. Sebastian suspected that it was the cops that had inspected the house. It wasn't uncommon for guns and ammo to be swiped from crime scenes nowadays now that the ATF's firearm registry had been compromised during the war and pre-war serial numbers had increased significantly in value. Hopefully, Aaron had already come in here and figured out a way to bring them somewhere else. Or maybe Alex had already started unloading his guns as part of his preparations. Either way, it was out of Sebastian's hands now and there was no sense in worrying about someone else's problem.

Sebastian turned and searched the rest of the room for anything of value. Propped up on one of the nightstands was a framed photo of Alex's old sniper platoon. Sebastian looked

through the faces in the photo, smiling at the nostalgia brought forward by each familiar face. In the front of the group was a board with the following description lettered onto it.

SNIPER INDOC PLATOON 1092

INSTRUCTORS

1ST SGT	GAMEZRICKLI
GY SGT	MOSKUS
SSGT	CHAMBERS
SGT	SMITH

HONOR GRAD

CPL	POSTATA, A.
-----	-------------

HIGH SHOOTER

CPL	MORSON, A.
-----	------------

As Sebastian soaked in the nostalgia, he remembered the friendly rivalry Aaron used to describe with great relish. It had really been just the two of them at that course because no one else could come close to them at any of the competitions. In the stories, Aaron would always feign his resentment when Alex won platoon grad and said it was because they had to give him a consolation prize since Aaron had already won high shooter at the range; but Aaron would always recant eventually and with complete sincerity say that it was because Alex was the best of them. Sebastian smiled. He knew Aaron was right.

After clearing the two spare bedrooms filled with more artifacts from Alex's unfinished projects, Sebastian returned to the truck with a small bag filled with some loose ammo and mementos he found on the shelves in the garage. He took the remaining gas can, poured it out around the house and set it on fire so that those cops couldn't take anything else from his friend. He sat in the truck and admired the chaotic beauty of the fire

disturbing the peaceful night and felt it was an appropriate homage to his friend's last days.

Fully supplied, Sebastian pulled back into the hospital parking lot. Just as he shifted into park, he saw Aaron exiting the sliding doors with the mortician pushing a loaded gurney beside him. Sebastian was very much relieved to see that Roger was in fact still alive and hopped out to help load the body into its makeshift freezer. Roger still looked pale and shaken up from his night, but it appeared that he had regained much of his composure during his embalming work. After packing down the body with ice and latching the door shut, the trio hopped out the bed and Aaron shut the tailgate.

"Roger, thank you for your help here." Aaron shoved his hand out towards Roger, "I appreciate your discretion, and you can expect a little award to be wired to your account in six months, after the investigation is over."

Roger gingerly accepted Aaron's outstretched hand and shook it. "So, we're done? You aren't going to do anything to my family?"

"Yeah. We're done. Don't tell anyone about tonight."

"But what if they come asking questions?"

"Deny everything. I've taken care of everything and there's no evidence of you taking custody of the body. You never saw this body or heard the name Postata."

"Ok." Roger scurried away from the haunting pair before they could change their mind.

Sebastian looked at Aaron questioningly. "So everything went smoothly in there? No casualties?"

"Yep. Now let's go before we jinx it."

Sebastian decided not to press further and climbed into the passenger seat. Aaron put the truck into drive and they slowly vanished into the empty night.

Chapter 16

"White people founded this country. This country wouldn't exist without white people. And white people are DONE being BULLIED!....We have God on our side, in this struggle."

-White nationalist, political agitator, and self-described incel Nick Fuentes

"A country without a border is not a country. A nation without a people is not a nation. America first is inevitable."

-Arizona Representative Paul Gossar

"You've been handed the responsibility to fight for our Constitution and stand for our freedoms and stop the Democrats who are the communist party of the United States of America."

-QAnon Conspiracist and Georgia Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene

Above comments made at the white supremacist rally 'America First Political Action Conference'

"In the years following the Civil War, a lot of Union veterans traveled to the South to attend statue dedications alongside their former adversaries. The nobility of those men should be the true "teachable moment" in the story. But liberals don't care about that."

-Tweet from white history revisionist, LGBTQ+ bigot, and Colorado Representative Lauren Boebert

"It shows that the most obscene figures are not the ignorant ranting racists, but the legal minds who front for them, who "invent" for them the legislative proposals and the propaganda bulletins. They deliberately choose to foster distortions, always under the guise of patriotism, upon a people who have no means of checking the facts."

"The great danger in the South comes precisely from the fact that the public is not informed."

"Nothing can describe the withering horror of this. You feel lost, sick at heart before such unmasked hatred, not so much because it threatens you as because it shows humans in such an inhuman light. You see a kind of insanity, something so obscene the very obscenity of it (rather than its threat) terrifies you."

-Black Like Me by John Howard Griffin

Senator Joseph Taylor hurriedly paced down the capitol building hallway towards his engagement at the Joint Committee for American Defense and Restructuring, of which he was a co-chair along with the Democratic Senator from Arizona. This was an exceptionally large and prestigious committee, and to interrupt the proceedings as a latecomer, especially as co-chair, wasn't the professional standard that Senator Taylor strived to maintain since he was first inspired to enter politics. He truly saw himself as a servant of the people.

On the committee there were twenty senators, including himself and his co-chair, and forty-five representatives. In addition to the congressional contingent, these meetings were

often frequented and led by the Joint Chiefs of Staff as well as members of the interim executive branch.

The committee was formed following the war as a way for congress to exert more control over the nation's defensive forces and military actions. It was widely known that during his coup and subsequent two-month despotic rule, the traitorous president had unilaterally directed the military to confiscate and destroy voting machines in unfavorable districts, violently quell riots and demonstrations without rules of engagement, falsely arrest any political dissidents, and to pressure his own banks to funnel funds into his accounts so that he could finally be as wealthy as he had always claimed to be. What wasn't widely reported or known was that he had also used the nation's nuclear arsenal as leverage to threaten foreign leaders that dared to condemn him and had even considered turning it on the more liberal American cities that he had always resented for thwarting his legitimate election.

Previous historians had argued that the height of the executive branch's abuse of military power began when President Truman illegally siphoned off funds to develop the a-bomb in labs illegally funded without the public's informed consent; and culminated with the bomb's eventual use over Japanese civilian targets to terminate a war with shock and awe, when they only had a few weeks of attrition left. Others argued that it occurred when the junior Bush had used marketing agencies to package and sell the unfounded wars in the middle east to the American public and used the ensuing fervor to pass the Patriot Act to grant himself unchecked power against the American people. Both of those theories and all previous assumptions had to be corrected against the real culmination of unchecked executive power by contemporary historians who got to witness the true depravity of American autocracy in the final years leading to the second civil war, the Decimation War.

By the time the Traitor's truest ambitions had come to light, there was no one left to oppose him when he used the military to confiscate America's right to vote. Any military leadership with the integrity to resist his advances had abandoned their posts long before the coup so that their names and impeccable service records couldn't be used to somehow legitimize his actions. This left a power vacuum within the upper echelons of the military which he was able to fill with sycophants. Eventually, these yes-men could have been valuable assets in America's military, if they had been allowed to properly mature, but they had been harvested too early and lacked the strategic insight needed to resist this amorphous entity enveloping their democracy more and more each day. The Traitor was clearly the center of gravity of this entity, but even if they wanted to, attacking him would only inflame the threat. What became the final straw for the Traitor's disciples, though, was when he began to seriously consider turning the country's nuclear arsenal on American cities. Once these idle ideations began to materialize into active pursuits, this nominal military leadership finally realized that they had misplaced their devotions and assassinated him without ceremony in his own briefing room two months into his dictatorship. By then it was too late; with large pockets of the country already in a constant state of violent chaos and no congressionally legitimized leader available for the country to coalesce around, the country descended into its civil war.

Because of this unchecked abuse of military power, Congress finally had a catalyst to seize back control of its military and war-time powers that had long ago been stripped from them in the name of fighting communism. The Joint Committee for American Defense and Restructuring was formed as a measure for returning control of the armed forces from the executive branch to the legislative branch. Originally, this committee was intended to 1) act as the stewards of the military until a more permanent solution for its management was proposed and

ratified and 2) come up with the permanent solution by restructuring the civilian chain of command over the military. Unfortunately, too many unknowns can make it nearly impossible to put a theoretical commission into practice, and this new world had far too many unanswered variables.

Domestically, the country was still perilously close to returning to its cannibalization at any given moment. Russian saboteurs maintained a ceaseless digital propaganda campaign to stoke the flames of war for far-right agitators and any direct attempt to counteract or curb this disinformation was seen as interference from the 'deep-state' trying to suppress their First Amendment rights, encouraging more Americans further into the unknown depths of the right. On the left side of the battle lines, the main grievance was the leniency shown to the conservative leadership and propaganda channels that had incubated the original secession and had made secession and civil war a central tenet of their ideology decades before the Traitor had been elected to office. With an estimated twenty million Americans killed in the war, nearly everyone had lost someone. Justice against those responsible for laying the foundations of a civil war wasn't an unreasonable expectation, but most of these figures had fled the country and only returned when they could once again be protected by the same shapeless force that had abetted the Traitor.

In addition to the overt sedition from Russia, there was growing concern over China's potentially nefarious intensions over the U.S. interests that it had acquired practically overnight. While they hadn't committed any belligerent acts yet, Chinese companies were buying up all available port space up and down the west coast and buying all of the available arable land and water rights across the American southwest. The policy was sold to the concerned American public as China helping to stabilize a nuclear power, but this wasn't very convincing. Most strategists interpreted this as China exploiting America's

weaknesses exposed during the war and securing cheap American resources for China's ambitious expansion plans, with the added benefit of making those resources unavailable to American markets still recovering from the war.

These same strategists also warned that the longer these policies were allowed to fester, the harder it would be to formulate a recovery plan that could free these resources from Chinese control in the future without 1) provoking a war with China; 2) permanently altering American property laws for the worse and removing more protections for American interests; 3) permanently damaging the U.S.'s reputation and scaring off other foreign investors; 4) serving a financial shock that could cripple swaths of the U.S. economy; or 5) any number of combinations of these fears in addition to whatever unknowns the uncontrolled variables were likely to produce.

America's foreign interests and diplomatic prospects were just as bleak. Russia kept the United States occupied with infighting so that they could reclaim old Soviet territories. Although not fully recognized by the international community, Russia had already annexed the Ukraine and Belarus; and they continued to antagonize other non-NATO members along their western border who stood in Russia's way to her long-held dream of occupying a warm-water port to the Atlantic. If only they had the patience to wait thirty years for the Arctic to melt and liberate their entire northern coastline from its frozen oppression.

China's ambitions were just as ostentatious but realized in a much more tactful and efficacious strategy. Without a western counterbalance, they had consolidated power in the western Pacific through economic strong-arming, supplemented by their very real military threats. The one China policy had targeted Taiwan as China's first priority, and the revolting territory was quickly reunited with the mainland after a quiet PRC-backed regime change that was met with little resistance after the pro-

western idealogues had seen the writing on the wall when the U.S. descended into chaos and decided to emigrate to much more protective markets. Next, China struck a deal with the African countries already within its realm of influence, along with a healthy coalition of OPEC members to purchase two decades' worth of fossil fuel futures and raw ores for pennies on the dollar. OPEC countries sprang at this opportunity and savagely underbid each other over the very valid fears that the fall of their largest importer would bring about enough instability to send their petrostates crashing down.

With fossil fuel sources monopolized, China then set out to “diplomatically” colonize its continental and oceanic neighbors to the southeast – Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines all took the ultimatum presented to them – either comply with Chinese diplomatic directives and continue to receive the discounted fuels their economies relied on or they could be blockaded and wither away into obscurity. Nobody balked at the material threat, and, within two weeks of the treatise's publication, all were confirmed signatories to the Southern Pacific Defense Treaty, as it was known in the west. To her credit, China didn't use its leverage to exploit these countries as it could have. Always looking towards the future, China believed that the best way to capitalize on their new power was to foster trust and diplomacy within these countries so that they'd remain within the Chinese sphere of influence long after the U.S. war was over and western powers could once again come sniffing around to ‘bargain’ for cheap resources and industrial exports. China continued to direct energy imports into these proxy territories, applying only a 5% tariff to the fixed prices negotiated with its new OPEC allies. This 5% tax was spent in whole on a new fleet of Aegis-class destroyers and smaller naval vessels used to patrol China's newly expanded realm in the southern Pacific. Their orders were simple – protect Chinese interests and severely “regulate” the trade routes of formerly western allies, mainly Japan and

Korea, whose paths required traversing the Chinese sphere of influence.

In addition to China controlling all of the Pacific's direct trade routes to Europe, Africa, and Australia, they also increased control over significant portions of mining outputs of Latin American countries along the Pacific rim through mutually favorable trade negotiations that continued to raise the premiums demanded for Chinese manufacturing. This left Japan and Korea completely cut off from any markets that could provide them with the raw materials used in their hi-tech exports; not that it would have mattered because China would have controlled their outputs on the way to their final markets. With their tech sectors atrophying, Japan and Korea's best and brightest began migrating in uncontrollable numbers to China. Europe and Australia tried to funnel some of the brain-drain to bolster their own technology sectors against China's consolidation but were thwarted by their own xenophobic immigration policies that had been implemented by reactionaries concerned with the "uncontrollable waves of less desirable" immigrant populations. This left Japan and South Korea in an inescapable Chinese spiral without any available allies to stick out a helping hand and pull them out of the current.

For the rest of the world, the status quo remained relatively stable. The middle east continued their infighting and struggle to self-organize now that western sabotage had been replaced by hostile market forces driven by Chinese consolidation. India maintained its focus on Pakistan and Bangladesh and maintained a slow but steady GDP growth. Surprisingly, or unsurprisingly from an eastern perspective, Chinese investments in Central African and South American countries continued to show great returns and sustained growth, furthering their commitment towards Chinese progress.

Also of note was the tiny country of El Salvador, where, almost overnight, they became the world's newest ultra-wealthy state thanks to their President's insane bet that tied the country's entire treasury and monetary system to cryptocurrencies which had replaced the American dollar as the lingua-franca of exchanges.

With these antagonistic developments constantly unfolding against the U.S. and its former allies, the Joint Committee for American Defense and Restructuring quickly realized that they could not effectively administer the country's defensive interests with all of the bureaucracy and petty politics that somehow managed to survive the war. Additionally, none of the lawmakers wanted to tarnish their records and imperil their political careers with the no-win decisions that they were inundated with on a daily basis. Instead, they opted to relinquish control to the temporary executive branch under their "direct supervision". This allowed them to maintain the appearance of responsibility while affording them the immunity to condemn any decision with the luxury of hindsight.

Cowardly as it was, this was the right decision to make for the country's current needs. Dealing with these crises around the clock required a fortitude and commitment that few of the legislators were equipped with. Constant supervision over military operations would also prevent the committee from completing its second purpose – restructuring the civilian chain of command over the armed forces. This new civilian chain of command would require a streamlined process that provided instant and standardized responses necessary for modern digital warfare that operated beyond the speed of human decision-making processes. This would also have to be done in a way that didn't, once-again, consolidate all of the power under one man; an elusive goal considering they had already pawned off most of their war powers back onto the executive branch just three months after acquiring them.

As a part of the Compromise that ended the war, the powers of the executive branch were divided into two counterparts, one civilian and one military, for the remainder of the presidential term under which the coup and subsequent civil war had occurred.

Under the civilian counterpart, a President Pro Tempore was selected by and came from what remained of the Senate; a Vice President Pro Tempore was selected by and came from what remained of the House of Representatives. It was agreed that neither the President Pro Tempore nor the Vice President Pro Tempore would be allowed to run for election of any federal office after fulfilling their temporary duties in an effort to maintain their integrities during the turbulent Reconstruction.

The military counterpart was led by the Commander in Chief Pro Tempore, who was a retired Marine Corps General that had been selected by the Decimated. He was the natural choice as he had already been venerated by the OIF/OEF veterans under the moniker “Mad Dog” for his actions and words that painted him as an incorruptible war demon during their twenty-year OIF/OEF conflicts. Following his retirement from these wars, the General had continued to serve his country as a presidential military advisor where he continued to demonstrate his unshakable commitment to his country. Many of the Decimated believed that the civil war should have never happened; if the rest of the country hadn’t slandered their patron saint with blasphemous insults designed to tear him down and protect the Traitor that he had begun to speak out against, forsaking his military privilege of political neutrality to warn of the imminent threat.

Reporting to the Commander in Chief Pro Tempore was the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The Chairman had already held this position under the Traitor, but in the weeks leading up to the coup, he had been quietly fired and replaced by the Traitor for defying orders to help subvert the election,

displaying a lack of absolute loyalty required by the fascist regime. This dedication to his country wasn't forgotten, however, and following the war, Congress had quickly and overwhelmingly voted to reinstate him to his former position as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Serving next to the Chairman were the acting directors of the CIA, FBI, and NSA. Surprisingly, all of these directors had managed to maintain the integrity of their organizations and keep them focused on their original charters during the war. Because of this, Congress had opted to keep them in their positions until a new president could be sworn in and submit new nominees at his discretion.

If the President Pro Tempore wanted to commit the country's defensive forces or intelligence assets in any capacity, he had to have a 3/5's majority vote from this military executive committee, and one of the votes would have to be the Commander in Chief Pro Tempore.

Attached to the military executive committee was the Decimated's military liaison, retired Navy Seal Captain Jason Roberts. He didn't serve in any official capacity, but did serve as an advisor to the committee and was understood to be the voice for the Decimated. He was allowed access to any military and intelligence briefings from which he'd disseminate information to the Decimated as he saw fit. To conceal any domestic or international security concerns from him was considered to be a breach of the Compromise and it was understood by all that this was done at the risk of not only one's life, but the lives of anyone close to them.

This interim executive branch's sole directive was to direct the country's military and intelligence assets to keep the country intact until a new, congressionally sanctioned executive branch could be implemented. Throughout the week, the congressional committee would be briefed on their activities and could retroactively veto decisions made by the executive branch. The committee also carried with it the authority to

imprison or even execute members of the executive branch for egregious military actions, as laid out by the relatively narrow definitions provided by the Compromise. Nevertheless, this provided an effective deterrent against the executive branch taking overly excessive steps against American citizens in the name of maintaining order.

This ad-hoc arrangement required fairly regular emergency sessions where the committee was consulted about acutely precarious situations for which the executives would force consent from the committee before proceeding with their dubious plans. These emergency sessions were a thorn in the side for many of the politicians that would rather not go on the record beforehand, preferring instead to later condemn the unpalatable decisions as rogue actions of the executive branch. Of course, these condemnations would only come forward into the light after the decisions had been successfully prosecuted as “guilty” in the court of public opinion. These emergency sessions were usually accompanied by a lot of orating and posturing by the legislators, but almost always ended with a unanimous vote of “absolute confidence in executive judgement” that would simultaneously absolve the committee of its responsibilities and allow the executive branch to act by removing the threat of retroactive punishment.

Due to the constant attention that their duties required, the executive branch usually operated out of the West Wing, usually sending lower-ranking proxies to debrief the Joint Committee on the weekly occurrences. Even when they’d called for emergency sessions, the most they would usually need to send to force a consent from the committee was two or three. Only for the most controversial decisions would the executive branch show up in its entirety, such as when they needed a decision on whether the United States would honor its NATO agreement and commit troops at the request of European members facing Russian aggressions, a decision that

qualified for the committee's lethal punishments but the Executive branch had already made.

That was why Senator Taylor was alarmed when he hurried into the committee chambers to find all seven leaders of the Executive branch sitting at a table at the front of the room with his expectant chair glaring across the expanse at him.

Chapter 17

*I believe I can see the future,
'cause I repeat the same routine.
I think I used to have a Purpose, then again,
that might have been a Dream.
I think I used to have a Voice,
now I never make a sound.*

“Pull off here.” Aaron’s voice seemed to have become sterner since he shaved off his berserker beard at the Pilot truck stop outside of Beaumont, Texas.

Seventeen hours. Sebastian flicked his blinker to indicate his departure at Convention Street. This was their seventh fucking stop and they had already been held back an extra seventeen hours and forty minutes since Sebastian started keeping track. It was kind of hard not to when Aaron was taking hours at a time in the bathrooms.

By the second stop Sebastian had caught on and slipped into the urinals to listen to Aaron calm Katrina down in the handicapped stall at the Las Cruces truck stop bathroom. Sebastian could hear her hysterical voice pouring out of the staticky phone speaker as she commanded more attention with even more outrageous claims. He couldn’t stand to stay for the end of the phone call. He just went and emptily waited in the car. He knew Aaron was just going to acquiesce. There was nothing he could do about it.

Seventeen hours and forty minutes wasted and now they were going to have to stop to sleep in Baton Rouge for the night. Just a few hours away from their first insertion point and they were going to have to waste another sleepless night on standby because of *her*.

“Take a right.” Kind of weird that Aaron didn’t have to use his phone to figure out directions; the last time they had been out

this late together, his meds had worn off and he had forgotten how to get home on Tucson's grid system.

"Straight."

Sebastian cruised through the string of green lights.

"Take a left." Aaron pointed to an empty parking lot of another dying strip mall.

"Dude, I don't want to sleep in the car. Let's just get to where we're going."

"We will," Aaron was withholding, "but we have to get something here first."

Sebastian pulled into the shopping center's next available entrance. Everything about it told him he was home. From the well-worn gravel protruding through the gravelly concrete or the broad-leafed St. Augustine grass that had reclaimed their cracks, to the lot of pine forest on its flank; everything about the dilapidated shopping center with its moldy awnings reminded him of his final destination. Even the constant drip of sweated beads that condensed from the oversaturated air urged him to push forward.

"Where are we going?"

"Over there." Aaron pointed towards the end of the strip.

Sebastian whipped the car left.

"That deli's closed."

"We're not getting dinner here. We're going there." Morson pointed to the tattoo parlor tucked away behind the sandwich shop.

"What are you picking up here?" Sebastian knew it. He wasn't even going to be able to claim his bounty because Morson was going to get them locked up for some shady shit *because of her*.

“Just gotta stop in and talk to someone. It’s going to be a minute so you should probably come inside.”

I fucking knew it. Sebastian stewed in his powers of perception. *Gonna die because of her. Start some shit and see if I don’t put one in the back of your dome, Morson.* The problem with his predictions was not only did he have to sit through them as they unfolded, he was always forced to ruminate and experience every possible permutation of them in the hours leading up to their inevitable manifestation.

“There’s one more thing.”

“What?”

“You have to get a tattoo.”

“Dude, I don’t know what this is, but you’re on your own tonight. I’m making it to Biloxi by dawn.”

The emergency broadcast signal blared over the stereo speakers.

URGENT MESSAGE FROM THE EMERGENCY BROADCAST SIGNAL. ALL RESIDENTS OF LOUISIANA, MISSISSIPPI, ALABAMA, TEXAS AND OTHER AREAS WITHIN THE PROJECTED PATH OF HURRICANE KAPPA. EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY. HURRICANE KAPPA HAS BEEN UPGRADED TO A CATEGORY 5 HURRICANE WITH SUSTAINED WINDSPEEDS EXCEEDING 175 MILES PER HOUR.

Morson snapped off the radio. “Part of your conscription is you have to have a certain mark.”

“Why?”

“So that we know you’re committed to the cause. We can’t afford to have conscripts start defecting and uncovering our operations. We need full-group accountability for this to work. It’ll also act as your CAC card to access dedicated assets, in case...”

"In case what, Aaron?" Sebastian already knew Aaron was setting the groundwork for *her*.

"In case something happens to me."

"What's the mark?"

"A bloodstripe."

"What do you mean a bloodstripe?"

"A 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ "-thick scarlet stripe." Aaron always did have an attention-to-detail when it came to the handbook.

"That sounds really impractical to tattoo lines down my legs right before we deploy."

"It won't be on the legs."

"Where then?"

"Here." Aaron sliced his hand across his Adam's apple. "Jugular to jugular."

"I thought we were trying to keep a low profile? Isn't that kind of a big target indicator?"

"We'll buy concealing makeup for it when it heals."

Sebastian looked up at the marquee above them.

Saint Michael's Tattoo

Sebastian sighed. *You're already dead.*

"Ok let's go." Sebastian heaved his resistant body out the car in one swift motion. "You coming or what?" Sebastian left an exasperated edge to his rhetorical question.

"Yeah, just give me a second," Katrina's obligations were already preoccupying Aaron as he lingered behind to play with that stupid fucking phone. Sebastian pulled his head out and forcefully shoved the door closed.

The shop's interior was pretty standard for a tattoo parlor. In the front waiting area, there was a row of comfortable-looking leather chairs pressed against the outward-facing windows with books of stylized tattoos resting on the glass coffee tables in front of them. The artists' favorite tattoo sets were featured on framed pages that hung on the walls amidst the standard flash art sets that were the shop's base revenue.

The shop was empty and the lights had been turned down except for one lone figure patiently waiting beside his chair, silhouetted by his station's studio lights. Masking the figure was a familiar face that Sebastian couldn't quite place. The man stood up and exhibited a frame that could only belong a rugby flanker. About 6'2" and 230 lbs. by Sebastian's quick estimate. And it looked as though every pound had been built to generate power – oversized but toned arms led into broad shoulders that tied into an even broader chest used to breathe in large gulps of air to feed the rest of his muscles. His back tapered into an envious 'v' before anchoring into massive legs. Sebastian estimated that his squat was easily over 400 lbs. and deadlift was over 550 lbs. There was no way he hadn't handily crossed the thousand-pound-lift threshold already.

"There he is! Where's Aaron?" The voice was familiar; they had definitely met before.

Sebastian approached to get a better look at the apparition escaping his memory. "He's right behind me. Just wrapping some stuff up in the car."

Ding!

The bell rang above the door as Aaron made his way inside. "I'm right here! Hey Brother! Sebastian, you remember Archer? We went through the sniper indoc together. You guys may have met when we'd come around the barracks with Alex? Or maybe at my wedding where he was a groomsman?"

“Oh yeah, I remember now. Mike, right?”

“I’m good!” Mike’s adonic features glowed in the smile brought on by Aaron’s hug. He slowly disengaged and reached out a hand to greet Sebastian.

“Hey Sebastian, how are you?”

Sebastian reached out his hand to complete the social transaction. “I’m fine.” He pointed to the sign hanging above Mike’s workstation. “I like your work.”

“Huh?” Mike turned his head to look. “Oh that!” Mike chuckled, “yeah, that was my nickname in the platoon.”

The art in question was clever, if not a little crass. In seamless, calligraphic lines, the words “^{The} BulGe” had been painted in jet black ink against an otherwise spotless white plane. The gentle bends and lines of the lettering had been anthropomorphized and folded into lustful feminine curves attached to multiple women copulating and climaxing.

“Oh? It’s just ‘The Bulge’ now?” Aaron let out his wry smile.

“Yep, I had to shorten it a little; it was scaring off too many clients.” Mike chuckled and gave a knowing smile. “Besides, Maria thinks it suits me better.”

Aaron’s boisterous laugh filled the shop. “That’s because she obviously never met the Bulgemaster!”

Sebastian shot Aaron a confused look.

Morson chuckled some more, “So, this guy was known across Twenty-Nine Palms as “The Bulgemaster” because he’d walk around and just lash out and grab fistfuls of gear without warning! Just mutilating genitals like a deranged chimp!” Aaron let out a raucous laugh before he could finish the thought.

Mike joined in the laughter, “Oh come on! It wasn’t that bad!”

“Dude, there’s gotta be at least a dozen open PTSD claims because of those little meatgrinders of yours, you fucking dick terrorist!”

Mike fell apart in a fit of laughter at the imagery, “GAHD! I JUST FUCKING LOVE DICK!” As Mike screamed, he assumed his predatory figure – legs fully bent and splayed, ready to spring at a moment’s notice; one arm underhandedly outstretched in front of him, the other overhead and behind with open fingers, like a scorpion waiting to strike with its menacing pincer and tail; and all gently bouncing in synch like a cat waiting for its ambush. His face took on a wild expression with wide, consuming eyes and a devious smile before succumbing to the laughter.

“You don’t have to worry about that here!” Mike addressed Sebastian as he continued to recover from the joy unlocked from better times. “I’m a changed man, I swear!”

“Mmm-hmmm” Aaron kept riffing with his brother.

Mike held up his hand to swear-in. “Honest! Can’t be fucking around like that when I’m tattooing! Especially not when we gotta meet guidebook standards! We’re doing another bloodstripe, right?”

“Yessir. One for each of us.”

“All right, well you’ve come to the right place. We’re going to get this as close to perfect as possible. We can’t have a fellow Marine out there out of regs.”

“So, you’re a part of this operation?” Sebastian was on guard. What did he mean by *another*?

“Nah...” Mike gave a nostalgic sigh. “No, unfortunately not. I was a reserve with them before they got deactivated, but I got a wife and couple of kids now. I can’t be out fucking about like that when I got them to look after. I try to help out where I can,

though. Just keeping that ‘top secret clearance’ active, just in case, y’know?”

“Yeah Sebastian, Mike here will be one of your points of contact in case something happens to me.” Aaron continued preparing his exit strategy. “He may be sitting this one out, but you should consider him an asset that can get you whatever you need – ammo, gear, guns, lodging, connections – so keep Baton Rouge in mind when transitioning to new AO’s.”

“Yeah, I got whatever you need, and if I don’t have it, I can figure out how to get it, brother.”

The adrenaline’s numbness enveloped Sebastian. “Sounds good. Let’s get this over with.” Sebastian stepped forward into the light. The wonderful thing about his welling emptiness was it was the one internal working that his face never betrayed; nobody knew how to look for it. Like the empty vacuum between stars and planets being miscategorized as darkened space, so Sebastian’s emptiness was always mistaken for stoicism or bravery.

“All right, ready for action! Just hop up there and we’ll get to it!”

Sebastian took his seat on the procedural chair and sat erect, waiting for further instruction.

“Lay back, brother.” Sebastian followed the man’s directions and reclined with the chair as Mike stomped on the hydraulic lever, releasing the tension until it laid nearly horizontal.

“You got any requests? It’s going to take him a minute.” Aaron held up his phone to display his music library.

“Tell me the story about the old man’s basement. The one with the tomatoes.”

He loved hearing Aaron’s stories. He understood what he was while laying on that ammonia-sterilized surface and knew that

it was a world far removed from himself, but he just loved the imagery of the family of giants.

Sebastian felt his last full breath inhale deep into his lungs as the needle, drunk on Montezuma red, made its first linear incision, opening him deeper. He had already decided before he opened the door.

*I'm still inside here,
a little bit comes bleeding through.
I wish this could've been any other way,
but I just don't know, I don't know, what else I can do.
Every day is exactly the same. Every day is exactly the same.
There is no love here and there is no pain.*

Chapter 18

*Here I lay, still and breathless,
just like always.
Still, I want some more.
Mirrors sideways,
who cares what's behind?
Just like always,
still your passenger.*

The memorial for Tony the Truck Stop Tiger had greened and darkened over as the fetid mold overtook the signage. Sebastian was wearisome. *Forty-two fucking hours. He was tired of delaying for her.* The pump snapped off and Sebastian ripped out the tortuous cord, spilling a line of loose gas on the concrete as the vacuum from the car's thirsty tank tried to suck out every last bit of sustenance. The fumes' benzenes did little to cover the air's putrid stench, rancid with rotting fish. Sebastian wraithly returned to his driver's seat and turned on the car.

"Hey, Aaron, I've been thinking." The sensation from the freshly inked tattoo made speaking a strange and slightly unpleasant experience for Sebastian, not that the physical discomfort was going to make him any more avoidant.

"Yeah, what is it, brother?" Sebastian loved Aaron's matching mark; it made him feel like one of the giants from his stories.

"Do we have to kill them?"

"What?"

"Do we have to kill them?" The sky darkened behind Dent as the late-December Hurricane Kappa clashed with another cascading cold front from the north. The once-in-a-century storm continued to plague the delicate bayous with its unadaptable slurry of rain, sleet, and ice for the third time in two seasons.

“Dude, you just got the tattoo. You should have told me you were having doubts because you can’t start backing out now.”

The cypress trees had already performed their early season shedding when the hail had begun. At first, the icefalls had been celebrated as beautiful phenomena when the friable projectiles crashed down onto the hearty woods and resonated their chilling song throughout the vacuous swamps, unobstructed from the discarded leaves that patiently waited for their turn to sink deeper into the putrid waters to be digested.

“Oh, no, it’s not like that. I was just wondering if we could make an exception for *them*.”

“Sebastian, he got an algorithmic score of 9.4. He has to go, and your...”

“That’s not what I meant. I was just thinking I might have a more fitting punishment for them.” Sebastian continued staring ahead, as he tried to prevent himself from dreaming the taillights in front of them weren’t beautiful Russian angels wanting to be chased.

The invasive pair continued to delight in the storms’ soliloquy that violently ripped into the naked cypress boughs and tore them limb from limb. The branches would add their own chaotic chords to the din as their sinewy fibers plucked and succumbed to His will. Gnarling the branches wasn’t enough for their punishment, though. Just when the limbs had bent to their limits, another unintentional but lethal feature of these projectiles was piercing hardened cores that would inject themselves and slice the limbs right off sending them crashing down on the piles shed below. *Slapper Ice*.

The meteorologists hadn’t found a name for the novel anthropogenic marvel, but Sebastian knew exactly what to call it. *Slapper Ice*. They sounded just like the .50 call slapper rounds

that would shed their plastic sabots as they slapped against the terracotta walls and shot their depleted uranium cores through the walls and into their Afghani targets. It hadn't been observed yet, but that's exactly how the lethal precipitation worked. The descending cold front was stratifying above the oncoming Hurricane, both oversaturated with water; and when the warm gulf boiled below, the cold strata above expelled all of its moisture into icy cores that would come crashing through the furious storm, collecting spiny, brittle outer shells as they whipped through the condensing humidity. Upon reaching their terminus, they would slam against the bleeding hardwoods and unleash their entropic kinetics further into their tissue.

Aaron gathered his breath as he finalized his tactful thought, "I'm not sure what you want here, bud. I mean, I guess I understand that it's complicated for you, and we can get someone else to do it if..."

"No! Absolutely not! These are mine and you aren't taking that away from me!" The strike-slip motion of the reactionary head-turn caused Sebastian's wound to reopen under the protective layers of healing ointment sealed-in by a layer of saranwrap. The excess blood had trickled into the raised ridges of the plastic and congealed into plasmatic browns and reds.

*Roll the window down,
this cool night air is curious
Let the whole world in.
Who cares who sees anything?
I'm your passenger!
I'm your passenger!*

"I'm not following. What are you asking for then?"

The cypress boughs would snap off with a thunderous bang as the hail kept beating on the fractured wounds. The splintered wood joyously waited its turn to be consumed by the anoxic swamp sludge, but the anaerobic bacteria choked on their

gluttonous bounty. The colonies began halting their growth, furiously protesting “Why do you hoard?!” to the canopies that would scream back, “Why do you take?!” The trees’ asphyxiating roots greedily choked on their fill of anoxic water and desperately sputtered it out as a healing balm to cover the splintered sores left behind by the crashing limbs, but the sap would impotently drip away, eviscerated of the essential oils that could have coagulated and staved off infection.

“I don’t want them to die. Death is far too merciful for them.” A drop of excess fluid seeped out from underneath the transparent barrier and dripped down Sebastian’s neck.

Aaron nodded. He was beginning to understand. “Well, what did you have in mind?”

“I want them to live out this war and for decades in the fallout. I want them to live as long as possible so that they can fully absorb the consequences of their actions.” The tingling in Sebastian’s neck had ceased.

Most of the fauna choked underneath the attrition. The alligators seemed to be the only able-bodied survivors of the extinction event. In exchange for surviving the storms, though, they had been forced to reveal their evolutionary secrets. For their access to oxygen, they had begun to purposefully forget their immediate needs as they forced their snouts to become frozen in the water’s surface, leaving the sheets pock-marked by leathery vents sticking out three to four inches above the hardened surface. A deep metabolic hibernation was triggered to preserve them in their cryo-induced sleep, as they preserved their thick skins under the protective ice as long as they just endured a serving of discomfort on the snout.

Sebastian wondered what the chances were that they could survive two extinction events. *How many other species could have survived the K/T extinction with them? How many could survive this one?*

“Well, I’m not really sure how to do that. I mean, I understand that you need this retribution, but I thought that you understood that this is about something much bigger and beyond ourselves. You understand that if we let them live, then they’ll continue to remain a threat and the resources at their disposal could be used against us. The amount of liquid assets that they have available to donate to the other side is cause enough to neutralize them. Let alone the amount of radicalization that they’re connected to...”

“No, I get all of that. I’m fully aware of what they’re capable of, and that’s why I had other plans for them.”

The fish and turtles drowned in their fetid state of arrested decomposition. Only the Darwinian-devourers had stomach acids strong enough to consume the wasted flesh laying all around but were disciplined enough to fast when they had their fill; and so, the flesh had to wait its turn with the vegetation.

“Well, what did you have in mind?”

“I agree that their assets can be threats and that we need to neutralize their finances. I think my way can take care of those concerns and more, though.” Sebastian rolled down the window to bask in the reassuring stench as he lit another cigarette that could keep him stimulated for another fifteen minutes.

Aaron nodded to Sebastian to go ahead.

“We don’t kill them. We bring Mike there and we have him tattoo their crimes on their faces and bodies. We take a clothing iron to their hairlines so that their grandchildren can see them exactly for what they are.”

Aaron measured his words. “Sebastian, that just radicalizes them further and just raises collateral-liability and risk.”

Sebastian held up a finger. "We take hammers to their spines. We break their forearms and shins, as fail-safes. We force them to lay wasting in bed and squander their grandchildren's inheritance as they spend all of their stolen savings on super-medicines and choke on those opiates that they believe are so easy to overcome. That will incapacitate them *and* neutralize the resources at their disposal." The smile spilled out of Sebastian's mouth as he pictured the giants initiating the wrathful little dragon.

"Sebastian that still leaves them as a liability. Keeping them alive allows them to publicly accuse us and compromise the mission. Also, it could also turn them into martyrs and push others to their side. And you're assuming that they don't euthanize themselves or die of an infection."

Sebastian's face warmed from the smile he tried to withhold from escaping. "Firstly, they'll survive. I can't explain why, but they'll cling to every last wasted breath of theirs. Finally, we rip out their tongues for their blasphemy. We force them to taste the ashes they left us. We bash in their eardrums so that they can never hear their grandchildren speak into their corrupting ears ever again. But we leave their eyes intact. I want them to be able to see the hate and resentment grow in their grandchildren as they hoard the last of their resources clutching to the last shreds of their wasted lives."

Aaron's face churned as he took the time to figure out the right answer that would deter Sebastian from his wrathful righteousness.

A smoldering fireline burned in the distance behind Dent's stony face, set off by one of the randomized bolts of lightning initiated by the ionizing storms. The sweeping blight the forests had succumbed to would rot and waterlog the woods and force the fires to smolder and advance at the pace of an early-century army fighting within the cover of trenches. The fires

would provide their own perverted benefits as they removed diseased trees from the healthier ranks that continued to suffocate under the stalled armies fighting over the last of the available oxygens.

In a fit of willful ignorance, or disconnect from reality, depending on who you asked, the boom-boom baby generation had smugly retorted that they had 'killed two birds with one stone'. And they truly believed their double-entendre, give or take a few billion lives, as the festering line acted as rolling fire brakes against the anthracitic tide that swept in more immiscible fuels spilled into the gulf from the latest BP platform spill. *If it ain't broke, don't fix it!* That was their smug response as they continued to watch their children's world burn around them, by their hands.

"You've been thinking about this for a while, huh?"

"A few years." The red marks across the leathered necks appeared to obfuscate into the fiery horizons that glowed a soft magenta behind miles of congested air; a seemingly natural adaptation to blend into the harsh realities of their unforgiving world.

"It's not in the cards." Aaron measured his words. "We're trying to keep a low profile for as long as possible. We can't have them becoming a part of the propaganda and have them pointing our operations out to the general public. That would mean serious dedicated resources to keeping them around out of spite. We're trying to save our country here and we can't afford the luxury of fitting the crimes to the punishments."

"Yeah. I guess it was just a fantastical thought." Sebastian returned his thoughts to the journey at hand. Forty-two hours and eighteen minutes since they had left and he's still at the fucking wheel because of *her*. The roads had funneled into opposing two-lane highways that floated above their shifting bases sinking into the Louisiana swamps; endless miles of

roadway guarded only by a two-foot-tall concrete barrier that wouldn't protest if Sebastian's little hybrid tried to escape into the murky waters. Only ten feet of fall separated them from his Cretaceous cousins starving for a live meal.

*Don't pull over.
This time won't you,
please, drive faster?
Roll the window down,
this cool night air is curious!
Let the whole world look in,
who cares who sees what tonight!
Roll these misty windows down to catch my breath and then,*

Sebastian's consciousness drifted in and out of that familiar place as he tried to induce the reasoning beyond why the blonde angels would be sprinting against them, while his fiery Kracotka continued to elude him. He pressed on the pedal to accelerate faster and give chase to the elusive angel that would never quite let him catch her. Just when he would overtake her, she would dissipate into her incorporeal form, leaving him in a fit of lucid understanding for a brief moment until the next car's bright red taillights caught his attention and called him forward with her dreamy promises.

He needed to pull over and get some sleep before the hallucinations overtook him and led them over the railings and back to his murky genesis. A part of him believed that his deprivation would be necessary for the task that lay just a few short hours away; although an increasingly overwhelming part of him urged him to pull over to sleep and recover his sobriety so that he could revel in his overdue retribution and catalog every detail to satiate future cravings.

"Счастье, моё..." She hated it whenever he tried to speak anything with the Russian soft sign; he made it sound so vulgar.

“Нет, Севчик.” Sebastian delighted in the day’s lesson with Professora Ivanova as he admired Svetlana’s piercing blue eyes enflamed by the deep reds that had been tamed into a braided tail that rested on her shoulder. Her scowl only served to intensify the beauty of her Slavic features for him.

“Снегурочка самая любимая дедушка в мире.” Sebastian always felt like Professora Anna Ivanovna added in a little extra любовь when she corrected him and it always made him want to participate more.

The swamp gas blended with the fire’s ash into an intoxicating fume that enraptured Sebastian.

“Нет! Ну Я согласен что она очень любимая,” Sebastian smiled. “И я согласен что самая красивая дедушка в мире русская.” Sebastian believed that Alexander Afanasyevha had perfectly captured the snow maiden’s likeness except for the small detail of her fiery red hair.

“Нет!” Sebastian’s smile crashed into ecstatic waves as she wrinkled up her nose and raised her hand to intercept his airborne kiss and toss it to the metro’s grimy tracks. “Поцелуй себя!” Sebastian loved chasing after his infatuation. It made it feel real. It made it feel more valuable whenever he was able to capture it, no matter how fleeting the moment.

*Go and go and go,
just drive me home and back again.
Here I lay, just like always.
Don't let me GO! GO! GO! GO! GO! GO! GO! GO!
Take me to the edge!*

Chapter 19

*Eye on the TV, 'cause tragedy thrills me
Whatever flavor it happens to be like
"Killed by the husband"
"Drowned by the ocean"
"Shot by his own son"
"She used the poison in his tea"
"Then kissed him goodbye"
That's my kind of story
It's no fun 'til someone dies
Why can't we just admit it?!
Why can't we just admit it?!
Why can't we just admit it?!*

Eighteen minutes and forty-two seconds. That was how long it took for the drilling mud to travel from the bottom of the hole to the surface according to Sebastian's new calculation. He was quickly becoming frustrated with having to regularly recalibrate his circulation times to keep up with the incredible drilling speeds that forced the chromatograph's software to skip tens of feet at a time to keep up with the rig's Payson system delivering the drilling data. Since the rig had adopted the Baker Hughes Kymera™ drill bit, their well completion times had decreased by over sixty percent, but many of the systems were still struggling to keep up with the new technology. What made the Kymera bit such a transformative tool was its hybrid technology that combined polycrystalline diamond compact (PDC) bit teeth, powered by the drill string's rotations, and recessed roller cone plates that were hydraulically animated by the pressurized drill mud. This dual action formed a drill bit that could chew through rock of any competency with minimal tooth loss, virtually no refraction off of hard stringers, and little to no grabbing of softer beds that typically forced inclinational and azimuthal deviations. All that meant for Sebastian was 14

hours of running back and forth between the mud pits and his monitors patiently screaming at him in the geologist's shack tucked away at the back of the forgotten Texas oil pad ten miles from Orla's stop sign.

Sebastian looked up from his computer and watched as the rig's traveling block worked its way downwards, forcing another triple-jointed stand into the interfingered rock layers in one smooth movement. Sure, these nights sucked, but to watch 92.4' of pipe get thrown into the ground in mere minutes like it was a stick in the mud was nothing short of incredible to him. He watched the tiny drill crew move about their platform as they worked tirelessly to match the efficiency of the new drill bit; each movement becoming more fluid, each man moving more in synch in a cooperative choreography led by the machinery. Without them, all of the drilling technology in the world would have been useless, and despite their overworked conditions, Sebastian was proud to contribute to such a proficient unit; each contributing their capabilities to a single entity that would compound their talents and deliver astounding results. It made him feel connected to a physical manifestation of man's industriousness and ingenuity that he so admired.

Mesmerized by the intricate dance, he stared as the rotary motor made its way down and came to a satisfying completion at the Kelly bushing. He heard the driller whistle to the worm on the ground and signal him to deliver another bucket of pipe dope up to the drilling floor as they prepared for another stand. This was Sebastian's cue to run out to the shakers and catch another sample for his mudlog. He threw on his hardhat and slipped on his steel toes and rushed out the door.

Sebastian's feet slipped and slid his way across the pad as his boots' thick, rubber soles failed to gain traction in the slick surface of shitty Texas caliche slushed together with relentless light hails. With each raised step, he'd shake off pounds of

excess mud from his boot and sink it back into the malleable muck that would grip and draw his foot downwards with its forceful suctioning.

Sebastian heard the hiss and mechanical whirr of the rotary motor being raised in preparation for another stand and hastened his march to grab another sample before the pumps were turned back on and flushed the current lithology away, replacing it with even deeper rock. He looked up to catch the derrick hand balancing high up in his perch at the top of the tower as he guided the next stand into the rotary's locking embrace. He loved the haunting attenuations the wobbling metal pipes produced as the guided movements flexed and bent them like giant reeds reaching for the empty night sky.

*Don't look at me like I am a monster
Frown out your one face, but with the other
Stare like a junkie into the TV
Stare like a zombie while the mother holds her child
Watches him die hands to the sky crying, "Why, oh why?"*

In his hurry up the stairs to the settling tanks, Sebastian smashed his helmet into the giant return line that connected the drill's outflows to the shakers and settling tanks. He felt his teeth smash into each other and the vertebrae in his neck grind as they tried to accommodate for the sudden lack of head room. He cursed the safety hazard as he continued to hurry towards his objective. Although he cherished how capable he felt being a part of such a proficient crew, he often wondered if the stress of trying to keep up with these impossible drilling rates was worth it, especially since he didn't plan on being around long enough to collect the completion bonuses.

The top of the settling tanks was Sebastian's domain on the rig. That was where the possum bellies and shakers were. Aptly named for the fresh stinks that emanated from its bowels, possum belly was the name of the large, simple metal boxes

that served as the initial resurfacing point for the drilling muds. The rock-laden fluids would bubble outwards from their miles-long journey into the box where the finer sediments were allowed to separate with the gentler eddies of the rapidly depressurizing current and settle out into sloped beds of the shakers that would shake drilling muds out of the larger rock pieces along a 20' conveyer that would empty the dried rocks into an overflowing garbage bin.

Sebastian hurried to the end of the shaker line to catch his sample and cursed when he, once again, found nothing but pulped wood and crushed walnut shells at the bottom of his sieves. He looked up the shaker line to find nothing but more shredded sheets saturated in mud.

"God damn driller!" Sebastian swore at the crew leader above the deafening din of the machinery. Another complication that arose from their astounding rates of penetration (ROP's) was the fractures that emerged in the hole's sidewalls from the drill string's violent thrashing about. The protruding lip of each pipe joint became another scraper for the unconformably-laid rock layers; and the faster they penetrated, the more rock bits were plucked out as the pipe scraped downwards; and to achieve their faster ROP's, the faster they'd have to spin the drill string at the surface, giving more power to the lateral destruction of the pipe that would transition from smoothly rotating about the wall like a spirograph to lifting and bashing about from wall to wall, forcing the more poorly consolidated beds to start degrading and crumble, leaving giant fractures in the rock for the mud to seep out of.

To reestablish and maintain the hydraulic pressures necessary for drilling, they would throw palettes of fibrous material – shredded wood, crushed shells, fiberglass, cotton – into the mud intake where it would be pumped down through the drill pipe, exit through the drill bit, and follow the mud's path back up towards the surface until it reached the fractures where the

mud was escaping and plug them up. It was an ingenious solution to patch holes inaccessible by miles of rock, but when the drillers used it as a catch-all solution to maintain their insane ROP's, they made the geologist's job nearly impossible.

The geos required some rock samples to map the drill bit's progress through discontinuous lithologies, but the rock cuttings would leak out into the fissures and be replaced by nothing but LCM at the surface. The fibrous material would also distort the measurement-while-drilling (MWD) tool's readings of the surrounding walls' gamma radiation, so that the marker beds enriched with radioactive minerals would bleed and blend into the noise; and the poor conductivity of the wood would also distort the tool's data as it electrically pulsed the information up the mud at the end of each stand. Finally, oil-based-muds (OBM's) were much heavier and chemically active than the water-based-muds, which made them much better suited to solubilizing denser mud clays and excluding native elements such as parabens and other complex hydrocarbon chains from the caustic mixture; but for those natural elements too light to exclude, such as hydrogen sulfide (H_2S) and methane (CH_4), the mud's molecular polarities would complex with and ionize them to be resorbed by the mud, allowing only a small window of time for the gases to reincorporate and take their lethal form back at the surface; but when LCM was introduced to the mixture they'd often get lost in the thick paste and lose their signatures.

All three of these signatures helped the geologist determine where they were in the formation and "steer" the drill bit as they guided the pipe from 90° to a 180° orientation that was parallel to the oil-saturated beds within the pay zone. With any one of these compromised, Sebastian could still land the curve in his impossibly small 20' target window, but when all three were distorted, it felt more like trying to shoot a bullseye from

atop a speeding freight train that was tracked to crash into the approaching cliff-face at any moment.

IF it Ain'T brOke, DOn't FiX it! STUPID FUCKING BOOM-BOOM BABIES! Sebastian cursed his predecessors as he shoveled out the hour's fourth load onto the shakers. The hydrogen sulfide had long since burned off the sting of the possum bellies' putrid stink as Sebastian removed shovelfuls of sediment from the tank in order to access fresh rock samples that had become trapped under the overburden.

The bellies' inability to self-regulate had become a major thorn in Sebastian's side. He didn't mind the stinging steam that vented as he freed the carcinogenic fumes that had been trapped under the mud's violent circulations. He didn't mind the cartilage that caught in his shoulder-sockets with every repetition of his awkward shovel toss overhead towards the shakers. He didn't even mind the deafening roar of the machinery that assaulted his consciousness through the neon-orange foam plugged into his ears. He hated that the sediments impeded his job performance. He hated that sample runs required an extra seven minutes to clear out each buildup. He hated that he always doubted the accuracy of his samples since the backed-up deposits negated all of his careful calculations and forced him to collect composite samples to maintain authenticity. He hated that he was never at his workstation to correct the directional driller's azimuths and inclinations as they screamed through formations.

GEOLOGIST TO THE COMPANY MAN SHACK! The message bellowed out over the rig's loudspeaker and reverberated on the radio clipped to Sebastian's chest.

"One more shovelful..." Sebastian thought, urged on by the expediency in the rig-leader's voice. He rushed to the end of the shakers and filled his sieve with a new batch of shale samples before tossing it on the grated floor in front of him. He

snatched the nearby hose and turned the valve to begin washing the rock in a bloody swirl of diesel. The wash's red-dye only shown in the light cast behind the shadows of the OSHA-yellow railings before falling back under the cover of the shakers' steamy shadows.

Sebastian had been sure to exclude the blocks of coal he suspected originated at a cave-in about four hundred feet up. He'd wondered where the reliable red methane spike that served as a signature for the coalbed had disappeared on his chromatograph. Must have gotten caught under all of that LCM. Sebastian swirled his sample one last time before checking the H_2S sensor clipped to his jacket collar. He smudged away the mud that had overtaken the cobble of bright yellow plastic to reveal two angry red lines that showed truer through the burgundy hues of the diesel that drenched it. Sebastian held it up to his ear to listen for the accompanying beeping that was supposed to alert him. The sensor's irritated chirping confirmed the deadly gas's presence. It must have been going off for a while now, screaming for attention but drowned out in the auditory overload of exhausting pumps, vibrating plates, scraping metals, and hissing steam pouring out from the tracked beast.

"Fuck!" Sebastian swirled his sample one last time in the diesel bath before darting off to report to his summoning, no doubt a beratement about his lack of PPE.

Sebastian tossed his sieve at the foot of the geology shack's entryway and ungloved his hands to unzip and vent his heavy Carhartt jacket that protected him against the encroaching blizzard, reinvigorated from its brief lull. He stomped into the hut to study his computer monitors and gather last minute data to support his opening arguments against the driller's ROP's. Having properly cleared the possum belly he found that his methane plot had maxxed the sensors out at over 10,000 ppm. Ethane, propane, butane, and C_5 all had correlating peaks, but

not spikes like the methane. This was definitely a gas fracture from the coal bed. He looked over at the hydrogen sulfide plot on the Payson system – 1800 ppm! He opened his chromatograph's software program to get a more accurate reading to defend himself against Dan's lecture – 1896 ppm. He released another quick "Fuck!" before he zipped up his jacket and sprinted out the door to the company man's house across the pad.

Sebastian took off his boots at the door and hung his heavy jacket on the hallway coat rack. The company man shack was much cleaner than the geologist's. Dan was quite particular when it came to matters of tidiness, a luxury afforded to him since he only had to go outside and up to the rig floor whenever the whim hit him; whereas Sebastian had given up on the illusion of cleanliness not even thirty minutes into his shift, creating a thick track of mud from the front door to his workstation, foregoing appearances so that he could streamline his work and leave his PPE on to keep up with the ROP's. Sebastian gingerly walked up to the partitioning counter as flakes of mud continued to fall from his caked pants onto the freshly swept floors.

The fourth quarter of the Saints' game quietly aired on the giant TV in the background as the Payson systems screamed in violent clashes of reds, whites, blues, and oranges across their monitors, all fighting for their due attention.

"Dent, why am I still losing pressure?!" Dan was stressed. Keeping the mud from escaping was important. He didn't care so much about the caustic sludge escaping and impregnating the aquifers found below thousands of feet of West Texas caliche, salt domes, and limestones. Those subterranean seas had soured years ago, and the reliant cattle barons had already moved their stocks to greener pastures so that they could exact their surface-use premiums from the energy companies without personal costs. No, containing the mud was important

because it was expensive to source and supply all of the specialty ingredients that could withstand the beating of a drilling cycle while still maintaining mud weight, pH, and viscosity that enabled the rotations to complete unimpeded. It was necessary to quarantine the costly concoction in order to keep the play's internal rates of return low and returns on investment high.

"It looks like we're having a cave-in up in that Brushy Canyon coal seam like I said we would. Fist-sized cobbles coming up on the shakers right now and the walnuts don't seem to be sticking. I told you to calm it down when we passed through it."

"What are you talking about?! I thought there was no coalbed? I thought you were in agreement with Tulsa on that one."

"What are *you* talking about? I pointed it out as soon as the gamma data came up. It was a sixty-foot signature."

"On the last well," Dan pointed out across the pad to the capped borehole that sat thirty feet north of the new hole, "there was almost no coal when we passed through, correct?"

"Yeah, but subsurface, those boreholes passed through the beds half a mile away from each other." Sebastian liked Dan and tried to withhold the sarcastic tone from infecting his speech too much.

"And?!"

"And that's not how geology works."

"What the fuck are you talking about, Sebastian?!" The young boss was too stressed about the mud losses taking place in his hole and didn't have the patience for Sebastian's riddled talk tonight.

"You're from Lafayette, right?"

"Yeah, so what?"

“So, when you drive through the swamps are you just passing through miles of foot-deep water, or are you passing through channels and rivers and shorelines and islands of land?”

Dan took a second to think about Sebastian’s apparent non-sequitur, “The second one. What’s your point?”

“Where do you think coal comes from, Dan? We’re literally going through ancient swamp, so there’s going to be variations in formation thickness, especially if it’s overlain by an unconformity.”

“Ok, but Kasmira didn’t seem to think that we’d be passing through it at the evening conference call and hasn’t said anything about it yet.”

“Kash is two time zones away and has a dozen other wells to babysit. She also doesn’t know that your driller’s been dumping palettes of LCM into the mud for the last ten stands and “forgetting” to put it on the Payson. It’s hiding my signatures.”

“What do you mean hiding signatures?!” Dan was becoming defensive. Sebastian hadn’t meant for his last comment to come out as a threat, but in these new plays where data was minimal, the company geologists ran the show over the engineers, and they didn’t react well to thousands of feet of compromised data.

“I didn’t mean it like that.” Sebastian unlatched the countertop and raised it to make his way to Dan’s angry monitors on the other side of the partition. Dan looked on annoyedly as the diesel and sweat dripped off of Sebastian’s FR’s and onto his spotless floor. Sebastian grabbed the mouse and quickly scrolled back 480’. “Look, there.” The gamma API’s drop to less than twenty for over sixty feet and we had a simultaneous loss in pressure. That’s when you called me, and I told you it was the coal bed.”

“Ok, but you also never confirmed that you found coal on the shakers. And where’s the methane spike?”

Sebastian scrolled back down to the real-time data. “Right there. It all got lost under all of the LCM and I released it just now when I shoveled out the possum bellies.”

“Holy shit! 10,000 ppm?” Dan picked up his radio and keyed the mic, “Sean, turn on the flare, we got a massive methane spike!” Dan turned back to Sebastian. “When were you going to tell me about this?” Dan was getting even more flustered; for an ex-Army Ranger, he lost his composure pretty easily.

Dan definitely knows how to break rocks. Sebastian gave a silent chuckle to his internal double-entendre. “It happened when I was catching my sample and you called me over. It’s just a back buildup from all of the LCM. It should clear out by the next stand.”

Dan looked back at the computers to confirm his next suspicion.

“Is that why my H₂S just crept up to 4000 ppm?!”

Sebastian shrugged, “Yeah, same formation. Same problem.”

“Let me guess, you were up there without a breathing apparatus again, too?”

Sebastian’s expressionless tone continued to disturb Dan’s sensibilities as he just held out his hands and gave an exasperated sigh. “I mean I didn’t see the gas on my charts and I thought we were clear of it.”

“Listen, dude, you may have a death wish, but I’m not getting run off this well because you won’t follow safety protocols. I want you wearing, not carrying, but wearing a SCBA for the next ten stands or until I say otherwise.”

Sebastian shrugged, "Yeah ok. So, what are you going to do about this cave-in? I got fist-sized chunks of coal coming up right now."

"Looks like we're going to have to trip out a few stands and pump a pill. You see the mud engineer out there?"

"Nah I think he's on the floor. Maybe pump in a palette of the fiberglass LCM before you trip? The walnuts don't seem to be sticking and I think it's a pretty big hole."

"Is that necessary? We're about to hit 60° and that shit always gets the pipe stuck in the curve."

"I mean it's almost all fist-sized cobbles coming out right now. You're going to need something to set the pill."

Dan sighed, "Fine, I'll get it started. Once we're done with the pill, I want you checking samples at ten-minute intervals and let me know when we're back to cuttings."

"You got it." Sebastian turned to leave before he rubbed Dan wrong any further but gave in to the urge to turn around and refine his analogy. "They're not like man-fist-sized cobbles."

"What?"

"The coal coming up, it's not like man-fist-sized cobbles." Sebastian held up his right fist to display his meaning. "They're not like this. I'd say the chunks coming up are closer to a teenage girl's fist."

"What?!" The screaming lights seemed to trickle to a dull annoyance as the young roughneck set down his radio and turned to focus all of his attention on Sebastian smiling with delight as he unraveled what he believed to be a helpful analogy.

"It's not like this. I'd say the coal chunks coming up are closer to a teenage girl's fist." Sebastian held up his left hand to display

an incomplete oval formed by his index finger and thumb for comparison. "Like this."

Dan's face grew skeptical of Sebastian, "Why do you know so much about gauging fist sizes?"

Sebastian didn't understand why Dan would focus on such an irrelevant detail. Just as he was about to reiterate his point, the late-December storm ripped open the door leading to the pad.

WHY CAN'T WE JUST ADMIT IT!?

WHY CAN'T WE JUST ADMIT IT!?

"I'll get that." Sebastian gave an apologetic smile. "Must've not latched all the way."

"Fucking geos." At least Dan had stopped using the 'mudlogger' slur. "Get out of my house, Dent."

Sebastian tried to volley the uncomfortable chuckle but it got drowned in the gales rhythmed by the staccato of the slamming door.

WHY CAN'T WE JUST ADMIT IT!?

WHY CAN'T WE JUST ADMIT IT!?

"I mean it Dent! I want you going up there with the SCBA's! Full PPE!" Dan yelled after the only crew member Tulsa wouldn't let him run off.

Sebastian heard the mud pumps give off a relieving sigh in the distance as the rotary block came to a grinding halt at the bottom of its stand. The machinery was going to get to take a well-deserved break to prepare for hole conditioning. He slid off the mud-caked hard-hat and roughed his hand through his hair to muss out all of the itches and discomforts that came from the annoying headwear. He took off his heavy FR jacket and hung it with his helmet above the day-hand's muddied boots just inside the door. The jacket's deep blacks had faded

and been bleached to an ashy gray around the seams from endless wash cycles harshened by industrial solvents strong enough to lift the diesel and mud. The exterior light of his house flickered and softened behind the swirls of steam condensing and pirouetting around his overbearing silhouette.

He pulled out a half-empty pack of Camel Blue cigarettes and pulled one out.

Ten miles from nowhere! Sebastian chuckled as he thought about Dan's rather amusing description of their rigsite. He puffed down eagerly on his first cigarette as he used his phone's digital compass to search across the inky plains for the light that hung over the only stop sign that marked Orla, Texas; exactly 10.7 miles west according to Sebastian's speedometer. Sebastian held up his cigarette for another puff and watched as the incensing smoke transitioned into the horizon where a sea of hidden pumpjacks flared off their sour gases into a brilliant display that mimicked the urban skylines they were spilt for. With so much light pollution, it was hard to make out if he had divined the true light that he sought, or just more methane flares.

Sebastian lit his second cigarette. The lighter's focused glow illuminated his worn face. More drops of mud from the shakers had caked to his face and formed a patterned ring to show where his eye protection had shielded against the dirty splatterings. He felt the weight of his expectant phone as it rested in the pocket against his thigh. He knew he was going to give into his compulsions but maybe he could keep himself distracted for one more cigarette. He pulled a long drag as he closed his eyes and allowed his muscles to shed some of the night's stress during his well-deserved break from the digging.

Sebastian liked taking the night shift. It was usually reserved for the greener geologists, but he had already steered dozens of holes in this basin without assistance and the overworked

company geologists back east decided put him on the night shift so that they'd have one less rig to babysit as they restlessly slept and fretted over their next eighteen-hour day. Sebastian liked the fact that there was no one for him to answer to. He liked that there was no one looking over his shoulder and undermining his formation calls from a different state and fucking up his drill curve. He liked that Dan the company man respected him enough to solicit an opinion from him every now and then but didn't care enough to learn about the stratigraphy and second-guess his explanations. He liked that he could sneak through the shadows to collect his samples with no one to stop and pester him with inconsequential small talk. Only the mud-engineer would find him once or twice a shift and he only wanted to talk specifics about the rock so that he could properly condition his mud.

Sebastian kicked off the layers of heavy mud against the stairs' metal railing as he lit his third cigarette. He packed the lighter into the partially crushed pack before tucking it back into his pocket. He felt the phone's form in the pocket and was forced by habit to take it out and discover the new message waiting for him. His break was over. He unlocked it and pulled open the conversation that had corrupted his mind when all he wanted was sleep.

Levi Dent

Received 7:24 am, 12/24/2018

Well I've been walked all over by everyone except for family and even they made my childhood miserable. I've been let down by almost everyone, including you. So I don't trust no one anymore and is why I was paranoid of you when you tried to come back.

Quite frankly you don't even have a fucking clue what I've been thru. Anyone else would have blown their brains out by now. You got to go fuck off and pretend that the Taylors were your family.

Not a fucking clue.

No wonder I've struggled with drugs because I've been playing defense by using them. Where were u when I was addicted to opiates and wanted to kill myself?

Sebastian knew where the unsolicited accusations had come from. He knew how hypervigilant their parents were in maintaining their broken sons' torments and pointing out where they had failed to meet their expectations; it removed their burden of guilt and prompted the boys to internalize their blame and publicly profess their guilt so that the world would never suspect the true culprits.

Sebastian reread his prepared response for the thousandth time.

Where was I? Where the fuck was I? Have you forgotten what kind of brother you were? I was a fucking child! An unwanted child! I had no parents! No love! And how did you help me? You had five years on me! Five years of first-hand experience in that fucked family and you did nothing to help me! I was just a dog for you to kick and use to ease your own suffering! Have you forgotten how you used the threat of OUR secrets to force

me to keep playing baseball to take dad's attention off of you while you quit? Did you forget how you used those same threats to make me quit the soccer team my first week of high school? Instead of getting to make friends and do something I was good at, I had to go home and wait for him every day. And you knew exactly what he was doing! All because you let your fears and anxieties control you! You let him goad you into fighting me! Do you know what it does to a child when they have to constantly fight someone twice their size? Then, when I had finally had enough and beat the fuck out of you, you had the audacity to start blaming me for your shit! You were 19! You should have known better! I had a dad that tore me apart and you to bully me when he wasn't around, all because you let him pedestal Ruth and make you feel inadequate. Then you just moved off to college and left me alone with him and never even bothered to check in on me. So yeah, I took refuge with the Taylors. Go fuck yourself you whiny little bitch. You had no right to have brotherly expectations of me because you never bothered to act like a brother yourself!

Sebastian took the last long drag of his third cigarette and smashed the butt under his heel before erasing his incendiary

draft. He feared the temptation to send it would become too powerful after reading Levi's unread texts that began buzzing in his hand again, almost as if Levi knew he was listening.

Received 10:42 pm 12/24/2018

Hey sorry to put that on you. I know you were in the military or whatever and were busy.

BTW I never wrote to you while you were away because I thought you hated me.

I just realized on Thanksgiving that Julia had been cheating on me with her best friend's husband. After everything I did for her and that's how she repaid me.

So that's what was pissing me off.

Sebastian stood there at the stairs to his shack, paralyzed by the discontent. He hated that his biological brother reflected so much of his pain back at him. He hated that Levi had to wander aimlessly through the world accepting scraps of corrupted affections for his subsistence because no one had bothered to teach him what actual love was. He hated that their parents were clearly reinforcing their beliefs and poisoning him against Sebastian for choosing to self-preserve. He hated that despite the radio silence and the thousand miles separating them, their parents could still effortlessly tear him apart. He hated that he wasn't strong enough to face them and give Levi the relief that he desperately needed. He hated the thought that their sister was probably there with her own family; a wasted life modeled exactly after their father's, infecting their parents' bitter existence into the next generation, freeing them to take whatever liberties they wanted with Levi, one of the spares. He

hated that Levi still constantly compared himself to the eldest child; the child that never bothered to think or choose for herself in exchange for free access to their inheritance. He hated that Levi couldn't see how fucked everything was and couldn't escape the family with him. He hated that he had never found the words that Levi needed to be convinced. He hated that he was theretofore unable to come up with the money to start their farm and rescue Levi.

Sebastian lit his fourth and final cigarette. Behind the hatred, he could feel the sadness welling, but he had ignored the noble emotion for so long that his mind and body could no longer process it. Instead, it was converted into his wrathful anger, but there was nothing he could do with it except for impotently suffer in silence. He ignored his base desires to be heard and repeated his latest axiom inspired by the Afghani farmers that hid their bloody tears behind the shadows.

Hey Levi, I hear what you're saying
but it's going to take more time
for me to respond to that in a non-
destructive way.

Merry Christmas.

The suffering stops with me. Sebastian sighed and shamefully put his phone away and continued puffing on his cigarette. The nicotine's effects had failed to muster anymore neurotransmitters after the second cigarette, but the aromatic fumes continued to provide him with the illusion of comfort. He looked out onto the trail leading to the compulsory voices offering him the truest mercy.

The line of shifting footprints leading from the geologist shack to the shakers changed and evolved with each sample run but remained essentially the same. With each pass, Sebastian's sieves would spill their bloody bounty of diesel into the rippled and shifting basins of peanut-butter mud left by his soles'

industrial patterns and were beginning to spill over into the oversized treads left by the rig dozer. As the fuel continued to accumulate, the pools' freezing point would lower, keeping them in a state of perpetual reanimation through the icy nights.

Learn to Swim! Learn to Swim! Learn to Swim! Learn to Swim!
Learn to Swim! Learn to Swim!
ldnuorg dna evarg no murd lnwod emoc
niar ekil doolB
Cause I'm praying for rain! I'm praying
for tidal waves!
ecnatsid efas doog a morf eid sgniht
hctaw ot deen I
I wanna see the ground give way! I
wanna watch it all go down!
*Why can't we just admit it?! Why can't we just admit it?! Why
can't we just admit it?!*

Sebastian heard the machinery's tired sigh as the pumps resisted the call to resume their perpetual motion. He rushed inside to put on his uniform before the pumps flushed away the remains of his precious sample. He snatched the clear mask attached to a steel oxygen canister hanging on the mudroom wall and felt the seal secure against his jawline as he tightened the securing straps across his skull and pressed the button that purged the humid breath fogging his vision. He threw on his hard hat over his matted crown of hair and rushed out the door. In his haste he left the heavy jacket hanging up above the sample sieve inside. He liked how the cold sting of the storm felt against his back and he figured there would be no need for the jacket's protection for the quick journey.

He felt the smile hiding under the concealment of his mask as he hastened his pace towards his destination. He unfalteringly marched up the stairs to the shakers, remembering to dodge the return line on this trip. He stood over the top of the possum bellies and watched as the mud began to well up and flow again. He waited until it cascaded over the belly walls before

breaking the seal and lifting his mask. The smile opened his mouth further and allowed him to gulp down giant breaths of the merciful wash spilling over him, forgiving and relieving him of all past memories and transgressions.

“One more...for good measure.” The steam condensed into gentle tears that effortlessly rolled down his tired cheeks as he greedily captured his third and final breath. He resealed his mask and released the breath, allowing the volatile vapors to paint the inside of the mask with brilliant shadows of his future. He heard the rig’s alarm sound off its jarring alert and mused at the two squads of chimerical forms assemble under the spotlights at the north end of the pad. How silly the machinations of man seemed to him in this moment.

*The universe is hostile, so impersonal,
Devour to survive, so it is, so it's always been
Vicariously, I live while the whole world dies
Much better you than I*

Chapter 20

"You know what else they say about my people? The polls, they say, I have the most loyal people. Did you ever see that? Where I could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose any voters, okay? It's like incredible."

-The Traitorous President, 2016

"He's not a war hero. He was a war hero because he was captured. I like people who weren't captured."

-Traitorous President on Vietnam POW and Arizona Senator John McCain, 2015

"When the looting starts, the shooting starts."

-Traitorous President on BLM Minneapolis protests over George Floyd murder, May 29, 2020

One of the results of this is that immaturity is taken to be a virtue, too. so that someone like that, let's say John Wayne Who spent most of his time on screen admonishing Indians, was in no necessity to grow up.

-Respectfully taken from *I Am Not Your Negro*, James Baldwin

Senator Taylor was alarmed when he hurried into the committee chambers to find all seven leaders of the Executive branch sitting at a table at the front of the room with his

expectant chair glaring across the expanse at him. The lighting had been darkened for the presentation displayed on large screens behind them. Projected onto the screens was a large map of Texas with some sort of demographic overlay on it. Giving the presentation were the familiar faces of two high-ranking analysts from the CIA and FBI that regularly led these briefings. The CIA agent presenting the current slide gave a brief pause when he caught Senator Taylor entering the back of the room. He gave an almost imperceptible nod before carrying on his speech; with hardly anyone in the room noticing the tardy senator sneaking in behind them.

Senator Taylor was slightly relieved that his entrance didn't make a scene but was irritated that he was late for what was obviously an important session, especially since he had no excuse for his tardiness, at least not one that he was willing to share with the committee.

"Don't worry, I already told them you had a prior commitment dealing with my guys," whispered a voice over his shoulder. Senator Taylor turned his head to find Captain Roberts lurking beside the double doors he had just entered. Roberts was wearing a knowing grin and gestured for Taylor to take his seat at the front.

"What did you s...?"

"I know everything my guys are up to and I know who's helping them. Now go take a seat; you shouldn't be missing any of this." The captain gave an unsettling wink before reaching out his arm to gently push the Senator in the right direction.

Senator Taylor thoughtlessly obeyed Captain Robert's directive; he had a way of demanding compliance without the target's conscious consent. Taylor was too flustered to think about anything, let alone play into the captain's deception games to ascertain what he knew without giving himself away. Taylor was already irked that dealing with his last-minute favor had

forced him to be late in front of the entire executive branch and joint committee, but now these favors were costing him unquantifiable leverage with Captain Roberts.

That's it! he thought as hurried towards his vacant seat, *I'm done with these fucking favors. I give them one thing and they comes back with ten new requests. I'm done sticking my neck out for these guys that won't even acknowledge the havoc that they're creating for everyone that they come into contact with!* Taylor made it up to his seat and placed his laptop on the table. He looked to the left and to the right to give his acknowledging nods as a silent apology for his tardiness before turning his attention to the presentation that the FBI agent had taken over.

“Collaborating Secretary Ezra’s intelligence regarding online activity from Russian propaganda centers, the FBI has seen a significant increase in public social media posts and private communications of agitators on our watchlist. This activity is well above the established baseline for Texas and all of the data indicates there’s going to be a push for secession within the next two weeks.

A wave of murmurs washed across the room. A representative from the crowd spoke out above it.

“But how is this different than what we’ve been dealing with? For the last three months, you’ve been telling us that Dallas and Houston have been experiencing this type of civil unrest.”

“Like we said, the intelligence has changed. There have been increasing trends in anti-American rhetoric on social media posts and it appears to have spread westward to Austin and parts of San Antonio.”

“But you’ve been telling us that ‘it was under control and that they’d eventually wear themselves down’ and now you’re saying that it’s spread?!”

“We also told you that this could get worse if you didn’t let us implement stricter martial law regimens and remove some of the restrictions for intelligence gathering in these areas, both of which you denied us up until six days ago.”

“That’s because we knew those restrictions were going to send a divisive message and push Texas further away and look at where we are now that we gave you what you asked for!”

The wave of murmurs recrudesced into a disorienting clamor of objections. Representatives stood and began to point fingers across the room as they tried to launch their inaudible accusations across the ocean of voices.

“SHUT THE FUCK UP!!”

The co-chair, Senator Marks from Arizona, stood up at his table to claim his demand. He was usually a quiet and reserved man, in-part selected as co-chair for his even temperament, along with his understanding of government agency operations that came along with his experiences as a NASA astronaut and former naval aviator. His time in the navy must have been the source of his outburst.

A hush fell over the room, with a few departing shots being thrown across the void as silent glares. Most of the committee had never heard the Arizona Senator say something so abrasive. He usually only spoke up to inform the committee of their procedural obligations. Rarely did he ever express his own opinion, but when he did, he did so with the calm measure of a man who had fully absorbed all of the information around him and could anticipate all of the possible replies through his constant introspection. Never had he let out such an unrestrained outburst, which is why it caught the room by such surprise. Even the military leaders were taken aback by the outburst.

“These two are trying to tell us that we could be on the brink of another civil war. This is not the time for finger pointing! This is not the time for I-told-you-so’s. It’s time to get fucking serious. Everyone is going to sit down, shut up, and we’re going to finish listening to the presentation. Afterwards, we’re going to discuss what our next steps are, but until these two are done talking, I don’t want to hear a word from any of you. Captain Roberts, would you mind taking over as Sergeant-at-Arms and remove anyone that talks during the remainder of the presentation?”

“You got it!” The captain yelled enthusiastically from the back of the room, eager for his chance to rough up some of these soft politicians. The quiet in the room sank even lower at the threat.

“Deputy Director Paul, the floor is yours.” Senator Marks gestured for the FBI agent to continue with his briefing as he readjusted his suit jacket and calmly sat down.”

“Yes, sorry for such a loaded start, but we need all of you to grasp the severity of the situation so that we can have your full attention. There’s a lot of information to get through here, but there’s also going to be some confusion. Senator Marks, with your blessing, I’m going to allow questions from the committee during the presentation.”

“Go ahead”, Senator Marks gave a waving motion to proceed, “but if you have a question, you’re going to raise your hand; and it had better be a real question that’s directly pertinent to our situation. I’m not playing kindergarten games with you guys today.”

“Thank you, Senator.” The FBI director redirected the room’s attention to the presentation of the screens. “As you’ll recall from last Friday’s briefing, this was the situation in Texas about ten days ago.” On the screen there was the same map of Texas that Senator Taylor had walked in on but had been too flustered to notice. In the map heading was the title description

'Texas Unrest and Pressure Points'. On the map there were predominant patterns of red dots and arrows clustering primarily in eastern portions of the state. Next to cities like Dallas/Ft. Worth, Houston, and Galveston, there were bullet points listing off the various National Guard and Marine Corps units that had been deployed to quell the demonstrations. Along the southern border there were curved purple arrows and highways highlighted in purple to show routes for smuggling circuits for military-grade weapons and hardware that had been discovered within the past months. Along the Gulf Coast there were lists of Coast Guard units and naval vessels that had been deployed along shipping lanes to inspect cargoes that were suspected of carrying more contraband.

"As you'll recall, we were intercepting unauthorized shipments of small-arms munitions that appeared to have been manufactured in Mexico and Brazil;" Paul pointed out their ingress routes into Texas along the violet bands with his laser pointer, "in addition to these, several shipping containers in the Galveston, Corpus Christi, and Beaumont ports were found to contain flak jackets, SAPI plates, Kevlar helmets, rockets, mortars, and other explosives from stockpiles in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Djibouti, left behind after our withdrawals from Desert Storm and OIF. It's unclear where these shipments were headed, but we don't believe that these were black market supplies to be distributed through criminal channels. They weren't following the typical routes for drug shipments and the organization and size of these shipments lead us to believe that they were sponsored and sent by an outside state; most indicators currently point to Russian coordination, for the purpose of arming Texas against us."

Director Paul clicked to the next slide, "Small arms with serial numbers sequential to those found in the shipments were confiscated at armed demonstrations in these cities." Paul clicked through the next five slides, leaving about ten seconds

in between each slide for everyone in the room to fully absorb the information. Each slide was a detailed map of the cities of Waco, Houston, Abilene, Austin, and Dallas/Ft. Worth; with each city sporting an alarming frequency of red dots scattered throughout.

“Those we arrested and confiscated these weapons from had varying degrees of affiliation with the Texas government.” Paul clicked to the next slide to show a bar graph with the compiled numbers plotted. He directed his laser to the far-left bar that that was exceptionally longer than the rest. “What’s most concerning is this number – over 68% of those arrested had no affiliations with any sort of Texas law enforcement or state guard. We interpret this to mean that there are distribution channels that we aren’t aware of that are moving these weapons into private citizens’ hands; multiplying the number of aggressors equipped with military-grade hardware in Texas by as much as 100-fold. As for the others arrested, 24% had affiliations with some sort of local law enforcement; 17% municipal police, 6% county sheriffs, and 1% volunteer deputies. In the remainder of this group, 20% were Texas National Guard, and 28% were affiliated with Texas administrative agencies such as TDOT and local court systems. Our sources within the Texas Rangers, National guard, and police stations located in the larger metropolitan areas have been sending conflicting reports that lead us to believe that this isn’t being organized by LEO or military agencies, although these are organizations that they’re recruiting heavily from. Additionally, these reports have confirmed a pattern linked to leaders of online groups found on the far-right platforms Parlor, Gab, and Rumble. We believe that they’ve organized into structures similar to those found in drug distribution networks where larger shipments are sent to mid-tier leaders that have been vetted, who then divide up the shipments among their most loyal foot soldiers to be distributed to their pool of potential recruits. These reports also collaborate a growing

narrative that there will be some sort of violent push for secession within the next two weeks. The online channels that we've been monitoring also seem to confirm this information.

Director Paul clicked to the next slide and Secretary Ezra began talking. "This is an email exchange that we intercepted between the Texan Lt. Governor and a high-ranking logistics officer in the Russian military that appears to be showing negotiations between Texas and Russia for Russian helicopters and tanks and smaller naval patrol crafts sourced from China."

A hand shot up.

"Yes, Representative King, you have a question?"

"You intercepted this email from Lt. Governor Patrick? Does that mean you've begun spying on Texas lawmakers?"

"No. In compliance with the committee's rules of engagement, we haven't monitored any American-based communications of Texas lawmakers. However, these communications were encrypted on international servers and extranational communications are not subject to American law. All of these were obtained following the guidelines defined by the committee and there should be no concern that private communications of political targets within the United States have been compromised."

The representative meekly lowered his hand and Secretary Ezra continued, unphased. "It appears that these negotiations are being held on the basis that Texas will secede and payment for these items will be done through a series of future concessions, including Russian naval ports being constructed on the Texas coast, energy exports to the continental U.S. will be set by quotas determined by Moscow, energy exports to international markets will have prices set by Moscow, and agricultural exports to Russia at heavily discounted prices. These concessions appear to validate the communications as

authentic negotiations between Texan and Russian leadership as they align with Russia's goals to 1) form a new, Russian-controlled oil cartel to challenge China's energy monopoly, 2) establish Atlantic-accessible shipyards to maintain their fleet exerting pressure on Europe, and 3) to establish a military stronghold on North American soil to begin exerting more military pressure on us."

Secretary Ezra clicked to the next slide that showed a political map of the world with most of Asia, Africa, and South America in red, and western Europe and the commonwealth countries in blue.

"If Texas secedes, we believe that their legitimacy as an independent country will be recognized by a majority of the world, making military actions and sanctions against them more difficult and diplomatically costly. Obviously, Russia and those eastern-bloc countries still under the Kremlin's influence will immediately move to recognize Texas so that they can begin trading and we should expect China to recognize Texas because it will further weaken us and effectively remove us as a threat to their future expansions. China's trade partners in Africa, Asia, and South America are expected to follow their lead. Even without China and Russia's influence, most of the countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America would most likely move to recognize Texas because it would be an embarrassment to the United States and they'll take any form of retributions that they can."

As the next slide turned over, Assistant Deputy Director Paul began speaking.

"We suspect that an official declaration of secession will occur in twelve days' time on November 26, because that day is the commemoration of an obscure battle from the Texas revolution and secession from Mexico. Texas Governor Douchey has called for a special session of the State Legislature to convene on

Thanksgiving Day and has advertised it as a special holiday session for a 'moment of remembrance' for fallen Texans in the civil war. We believe that this is where he'll call for a secession vote from the Texas state legislature."

He clicked to the next slide showing breakdowns of the state legislature.

"Over 60% of the current Texas state legislature have public records where they either had sympathetic leanings for the secessionists or actively called for military actions to resolve their 'grievances' before the Traitor's coup. Over 80% of the legislature have recorded speeches where they allude to Texas being an independent republic before the war, and this has been an extremely popular sentiment found within Texas's alt-right movement. If a call to secede is submitted to the floor, then our analysts predict with 95% certainty that it will pass by a wide margin. However, that's not completely indicative of the attitudes found within the population. Texas districts have been some of the most susceptible to gerrymandering over the last three decades, resulting in an unrepresentative political bias towards the right and towards violence."

He clicked to a new slide that showed outbreaks of civil violence overlain onto a map of Texas political districts. There was a clear delineation of pro-American districts clustered in the western and southern portions of Texas while the pro-secession districts were concentrated in the eastern half of the state that correlated with most of the violence.

"As you'll recall from earlier briefings, we've been deploying troops to quell uprisings in major metropolitan areas located in east Texas. Up until about last week, these uprisings remained contained within this area." Paul focused his laser on a cluster of red dots between Dallas and Houston. "Then we started seeing a pattern of violence begin trickling westward, starting a little over two weeks ago and coming to a head these past few

days. Based on information compiled from license plates and arrestees from these events, we believe that the majority of these agitators are moving their displays from their eastern cities in an attempt to pressure lawmakers based in Austin, with some bleed-over into San Antonio. The levels of counterprotests in these central cities would also confirm that this is an eastern-based movement. Up until now, all indicators have shown that populations within the South Texas plains, Big Bend, central Texas, and the Texas panhandle areas have remained mostly loyal to the U.S. We believe that this is due to a combination of factors, but primarily due to their relatively sparse population densities and proximity to Mexico; they're extremely vulnerable to outside hostilities, whether it be the Mexican government, cartels, or other invading forces, and we believe that most of the population is acutely aware of that vulnerability. Because of this, we believe that if Texas were to secede, we'd be able to run a concurrent separatist campaign that would keep west Texas intact and a part of the U.S. with a high chance for success."

Deputy Director Paul clicked to the next slide of a map highlighting areas of strategic importance in Texas.

"Ahh, we're about to enter into presenting our options for mitigating damages from a secession. General Milnus will be taking over from here, so now will be a good time to take a brief pause and take some questions to clear up any confusions y'all may have."

Chapter 21

*Some say the end is near,
some say we'll see Armageddon soon.
I certainly hope we will
I sure could use a vacation from this.*

Forty-five hours. They were finally approaching their first insertion point after forty-five long hours behind the wheel. Sebastian rolled down the windows to soak in the refreshing wind. He had already broken through his sleepless delirium at the state line and now absorbed the world with energized vigor and anticipation. He rejoiced in the storm's calming airs as he smelled the fresh dews of the swirling cyclone, tainted ever so slightly by the salted sea that sustained it. He looked out Aaron's window to see the grayed waves crashing into the shoreline, tilling and preparing it to receive the storm's inevitable destruction. Sebastian looked at the titan reclined and sleeping in his passenger seat and admired how the fresh red line etched into his neck contrasted against the dull, darkening grays of the surrounding environment.

Highway 90 was mostly empty as the little white sedan steadily trolled along. Most had heeded the emergency station's warnings and evacuated over twenty-four hours ago, leaving his childhood city empty, save for the sporadic gatherings of only the most materially obsessed that opted to remain behind to save their silly little trinkets from the threat of those lousy looters. Although, more were still trickling out on the west-bound side after Kappa's upgrade to a healthy category 5 storm; most meteorologic reports had speculated that the storm would continue to break and downgrade from a 5 to a 2 as it sacrificed the brunt of its wrath over Cuba, followed up by a head-on collision with the advancing blizzard from the north.

The encroaching storm continued to flood the outer lanes that graded towards the embanking storm drains, already full of the

slush that had been shed by the northern storm as it broke and retreated in the face of the hurricane. Sebastian veered off from the unobstructed travel lane to hydroplane and absorb the delightful sensations of the car's shifting weightlessness. The slushy waters enchanted him with their song as they echoed within the wheel wells. He speculated what tasteless idiom the southerners would conjure up to describe an icy hurricane. It would be hard to top the inspired vulgarity they had coined for the spring showers that fell under full sunlight, or 'the devil beating his wife' as they proudly put it. *Devil must be tweaking her nipples.*

Aaron arose from his slumber to catch a fleeting glimpse of Sebastian's grin and delighted chuckle. He smiled with Sebastian as he thumbed the electronic lever that raised his seat from reclined to upright.

"Oh good, you're up." Sebastian snatched his smile away.

"Yeah, looks like the storm is getting worse, no?" Aaron rolled his head closer to his window to feel more of the stinging rain against his open wound. "We almost there?"

"Yeah about 5-10 more minutes." Sebastian paused to shake out the annoyance. "The storm is picking up. It should be easy enough to outrun it here for the next few hours, but we're going to have to ditch the car if we don't want to get caught in a floodway." He didn't care so much about losing the car, it was just...just that it always seemed to him that he was the one that was expected to take on the collateral damages in their dealings.

"We can remove the license plate and scratch off the VIN's, but it's still a pretty big piece of evidence to risk leaving behind. You got any thoughts on that?"

"Yeah. I figure we can park it at the end of one of these harbor lines and just torch it. The storm should have no trouble

carrying the remains out into the gulf. Even if it doesn't, nobody would bother to investigate it because there's always so much debris to clean up after these storms."

Aaron thought about it for a second. "Yeah, I guess I'm good with that." He hesitated, "You ready?"

"Yep." Sebastian gave nothing away, despite the intricate matrix of emotions that had entrained him. He felt a nostalgic sense of that excitement that guided him on his first active helo-insertion into the Helmand River Valley. He felt the familiar anxiousness to complete his indoctrination. He felt the same need to conform and earn his bloodstripe. He felt a novel fear; a fear that he couldn't quite define; a sneaking suspicion that his righteous retribution would somehow be snatched away from him when he was so close.

The mighty limbs of the sprawling oak trees creaked and moaned under the forceful weight of the wind as the pair pulled up the gravel driveway of their destination. Sebastian noticed that one of the centurions had abandoned its post as the vanguard, uprooted years ago in another storm while he was away. He thought the plantation-style house somehow looked barren without it, despite the neighboring trees working and spreading their eager branches into the gaping canopy.

The front windows had been boarded with fitted sheets of plywood. On the boards, the homeowners had crudely spray-painted *YOU LOOT! WE SHOOT! :)* which caused Aaron to fall into a fit of laughter at the sight.

This is it, Sebastian thought, we finally get here and he fucking loses it.

Aaron tried to wipe away the tears and answer Sebastian's bewildered and unamused stare but struggled to regain his composure. "I'm sorry," Aaron wiped away more tears. "It's just..." Aaron couldn't contain the giggling that kept bubbling

out. "It's just, who wrote that?! Your dad?" He fell into another uncontrollable stitch of laughter.

"Yeah, probably." Sebastian failed to find the punchline.

"What's he going to do?" Aaron fell back into his delirious laughter. He had only met Sebastian's dad once, years ago, and hadn't been impressed. From what Aaron remembered, he was a whiny, sniveling version of Sebastian, terrified of Aaron's knowing eye, and desperate to keep his vulnerable ego intact. "What's he going to do?" Aaron pantomimed moving invisible glasses down the bridge of his nose and staring over them, the man's signature move that their group had taken to mocking relentlessly for years, "Start naming their body parts and big brain them to death? Lateralus Dorsi! Excelsis Dongus!" Aaron kept naming nonsensical Latin parts in his mocking tone that mimicked the doctor's attempts at belittling those that threatened his intellectual superiority. "Can you imagine that scrawny little cuck trying to hold a rifle? Oh my god, I hope he's serious! I hope we get to see it!" Aaron fell back into his uncontrollable fit.

Sebastian's smile crept out. "Oh, you've never seen him shoot. Like a toddler with Parkinson's." Sebastian succumbed to the infectious laughter; it was impossible to withhold from Aaron when he saw everything so clearly. "Yeah, I would've paid everything just to watch a drill instructor break him with a sheet of paper!" Tears of joy streamed down Sebastian's face as he communed with his Brother.

"But does he seriously have like zero self-awareness?! Like what hero-delusion do you think he was picturing in his mind when he was writing that?! With the smiley face and all!"

The delight had tickled every last bit of Sebastian's bitterness out. "Dude the image that he tries to present to the world is absolutely insane." Sebastian's smile grew even wider, "And he

gets so mad when everyone doesn't play along with his silly fantasy!"

"Oh my god! I'm so excited about this!" Aaron treasured the natural smile radiating out from Sebastian's face. It had been too long since Sebastian had replaced it with his masking imitation. "How has he gotten away with this for so long?"

Sebastian's laughter subsided to a controllable chuckle at the pointed question. "I don't know, man. I should have smashed his teeth in when I was fourteen and realized I could take him." Sebastian's eyes shamefully lowered at his regret.

Aaron let out a hearty chuckle and gave Sebastian's shoulder a brotherly squeeze. "Welp, there's no time like the present to correct past mistakes!" Aaron's laughter took hold of him again. "I'm sorry, I'm just trying to picture him trying to wave a gun around like he's going to do something!"

Sebastian's chuckle grew to an amused laugh before throttling back to his uncontained roar. The pair sat there egging each other's laughter more and more until their jaws hurt and their tears dried up. Just two boys rejoicing in their shared sanity; a sweet psalmody condemned by the shameful world around them.

*'Cause I'm praying for rain.
I'm praying for tidal waves.
I wanna see the ground give way.
I wanna watch it all go down.
Mom, please flush it all away.
I wanna see it go right in and down.
Watch you flush it all away.
LEARN TO SWIM!
LEARN TO SWIM!
LEARN TO SWIM!*

Chapter 22

"If you vote democrat this week, I don't even want you around this church, you can get out; you can get out you demon. You can get out you baby-butcherin, election thief! You cannot be a Christian and vote democrat in this nation! They are God-denying demons that butcher babies and hate this nation!"

-Greg Locke, American Baptist pastor and founder of Global Vision Bible Church

*To look around the United States today
is enough to make prophets and angels weep.
This is not the land of the free;
it is only very unwillingly and sporadically
The home of the brave.*

-Faithfully taken from *I Am Not Your Negro*,
James Baldwin

Deputy Director Paul waited expectantly for questions but was met with silence. The air was heavy with anticipatory energy, but the room was quiet, with the exception of some muted shuffles emanating from a few of the committee members nervously readjusting in their seats. There were a few hesitant faces, attached to wavering hands, but none with the commitment to voice their concerns to the group. No one wanted to be the first to ask an inane question and catch the wrath of Senator Marks or Captain Roberts, especially not after such a grave presentation.

Senator Taylor cleared his throat and addressed the presenters. "You're presenting this like it's already been predetermined,

but we haven't heard any talk from Texas leadership about secession. So, is this a potential scenario...or...I guess, what are the odds that any of this is actually going to occur?

"Yeah, ok I understand where this could have been unclear." Secretary Ezra fielded the question. "So, here's a summary of the situation down there. Russia has kicked its online separation campaign into high gear and we're seeing high rates of radicalization rhetoric from American users in the online forums we're monitoring. Additionally, we have Texan leadership linked to negotiations of large military purchases from hostile entities, and the military hardware attached to these negotiations is already funneling in and finding its way into the hands of the unaffiliated Texas citizenry. The governor has called for a special session of the Texas legislature which has not been done since the war ended and has the unsettling element of very opportunistic timing. So, I'd say that this is an imminent threat and should be treated as a short-term eventuality rather than a possibility."

"I see." Senator Taylor wore a stoic face, but underneath his controlled exterior he was shocked and dismayed at the relative ease that the Russians could sow disloyalty into his country. "And if the state legislature voted to secede, the Texan citizenry would accept this edict?"

"Well, that's why we included the last slide of the presentation. There are multiple scenarios that can occur where the U.S. retains control over varying amounts of the Texas territory; General Milnus is going to go over the most likely scenarios, but if you take the state as a whole, then by our current numbers, we estimate that 52% to 64% of Texans favor secession with the remainder showing strong loyalty to the U.S. However, if you look at the distribution in our political district maps, you'll see that those numbers are largely skewed by larger metropolitan areas located in the more insulated interior of east Texas, with pro-secession sentiments reaching numbers as

high as 76% in Harris County; but if we look at the numbers in districts west and south of Austin, we see that the citizenry strongly favors staying a part of the United States. Over 80% of the citizens within 100 miles of the Mexico border strongly support staying in the U.S. That's why we believe that we'll have a high chance of success for pushing to keep western and southern Texas as a part of the Union."

"Mm-hmm, and Mexico has no part in this? From what you've presented, it seems like they'd have quite a bit to gain from a divided and vulnerable Texas."

"No sir. Nothing from our intelligence indicates that Mexico is planning anything or participated in any of the sedition currently taking place. They have increased their military budget significantly and have increased the size of their standing army by roughly 30% since the war broke out, but these actions appear to be reactive measures meant to restabilize their northern states that developed unrest in response to neighboring violence north of the Rio Grande. The majority of these military gains have been focused on ground forces and light-armored vehicles, with minor increases in their helicopter wings and mechanized armor. Additionally, we haven't seen any abnormal troop buildups on the border in anticipation of this session which indicates that they're probably in the dark regarding Texas developments. Everything here points to Russian and Texan leadership.

"I see. Thank you." Senator Taylor nodded and began writing some notes on a pad that was in front of him to indicate that he was done talking. He had nothing to write, but he wanted the room's attention taken off of him for fear that everyone could see the heavy chest palpitations through his jacket and shaking arms responding to the anxieties overtaking him.

Another hand slowly rose from the second row. It was a representative from Nevada.

“Yes, Congressman Michaels.”

“Umm, I don’t want this to come across as finger-pointing, so please stop me if it is, Mr. Marks,” The co-chair raised his eyes to give the speaker a stern look of consideration, “but it seems like you have very little information on the inner-workings of the Texas political leadership; perhaps we should ask Senator Veracruz what his take on all of this is. Ya’know? Because wouldn’t he have an inside connection to Texas politics?”

The pointed question raised several reaffirming ascents from the room as committee members began looking around for the statesman in question. The quiet murmur began to grow and more heads began to turn and search as the pause waiting for the accused senator’s response grew to a suspicious length.

“Hey, where is James Flaccid, anyways?!” An incredulous voice from the back verbalized what was on the room’s collective mind.

Senator Veracruz, the Texas Senator in question, was a political fixture that was a bit of an unexplainable contradiction in the sense that he was the most spineless man you could ever meet, but, at the same time, was the most tenacious survivor. He had been elected to the Federal Senate several years before and made a bid in the 2016 presidential primaries where he had been mercilessly beaten out by the Traitor. What was remarkable was that he had no real accomplishments up until that point, no real accolades to set him apart from your average used car salesman, and yet he ran for a bid for the Republican party because he believed that’s what he had earned. What’s more, he was viewed as a favorite in the primaries based entirely on empty messaging and theatricalities. That is, at least, until the Traitor threw his hat into the ring and began bullying every candidate in the ring with him, to the delight of the party’s malicious base. Whether it was just his unlikeable, weaselly personality or just the

anemic way with which he carried himself, Senator Veracruz had become the favorite target for the Traitor and absorbed the lion's share of his belligerence. The Traitor spewed unspeakable hate towards the senator, his wife, and everyone attached to him, and Senator Veracruz just began to take it all without any resistance once he realized that the Traitor had built up the momentum to steamroll his way into the Republican presidential nomination, and ultimately into the oval office. Once the Traitor had become his direct boss, Senator Veracruz became the best little submissive that he could and could always be relied upon to obstruct investigations into the traitor's ethical violations or appear on TV to spin and excuse his most heinous behavior. Even during the insurrection and two-month dictatorship, Senator Veracruz was still trying to curry favor with his abuser to the detriment of his own country.

His continued tenure as a federal senator following all of this bootlicking was completely nonsensical to most outsiders and his selection to be on the most powerful committee in Congress was nearly incomprehensible. The only way to make sense of it all was to adopt the belief that the fates must have smiled on him in some sort of twisted karmic balancing for all of the derision he had endured. Although his messaging had shifted and distorted into the logical equivalent of a mobius strip in order to meet the narratives of the moment, he had always remained true to one axiom that was the true source of his power, the source of his survivability – always align your message with exactly what the mob currently wanted. That was it. And with such a galvanized mob, it was easy to align one's message without losing any voter base, as long as you don't have any morals or integrity. By staying true to his one tenet and taking any chance he could to appear on the far-right propaganda channels, he had managed to remain at the forefront of the Texas conservative consciousness, eventually making him their unofficial voice in a new broken political field;

filled with new players but governed by all of the old rules. To add to his karmic windfall, Texas had remained one of the most volatile states and most outspoken agitators against the reunited union, and selecting a Texas senator and representative was the easiest way to placate one of the most radicalized states blessed with a mineral endowment vital to rebuilding and the nation's security.

However, if one were privy to any of the new committee's proceedings, one would quickly realize that the fates had not awarded him this assignment as a karmic blessing, but would instead see that this post was just a mere continuation of a cruel joke on a man that was too dimwitted to understand that he was the punchline. Although he was selected to the committee as a senior member, he didn't command any of the respect that came with the position. His derogatory nickname, 'James Flaccid', was used interchangeably with his title of Senator. Like many jokes of the time, this nickname was derived from a series of evolving internet memes centered around him. It started with his rather quick descent into morbid obesity during the Traitor's presidential term; his rapid weight gain had made him the punchline to an endless string of jokes on internet forums and daily news shows. In a misguided attempt to add some machismo to his image and hopefully save some face with his voter base, he had decided to grow out a beard and moustache, but the wildly unflattering facial hair, combined with his short, portly stature, had the opposite effect, turning him into a comical caricature and muse for many internet trolls. In a reference to the popular X-Men series, one social media post had referred to him as Wolverine's impotent cousin who shot out floppy phalluses from his hands instead of Wolverine's signature adamantium claws. This observation became a viral meme that took off across social media like wildfire. From there, he had been dubbed "James Flaccid" as a derivation of Wolverine's given name, James Logan. Even the Generals and intelligence officials who went to great lengths to

maintain neutral professionalism towards the elected officials at these meetings were regularly caught slipping and calling him by a variation of “James Flaccid” instead of using his senator title. Senator Veracruz never objected though and would unabashedly continue with the conversations at hand. The political equivalent of a cockroach, he subsisted on their derisions, knowing that he’d be able to survive long after they’ve perished in this apocalyptic arena that wouldn’t allow luxuries like basic human dignity to exist.

Today, though, he wasn’t there to absorb their contempt.

“Senator Veracruz isn’t here today.” Director Paul stated, “We’ve reached out to him multiple times for a deposition, but it appears that over the weekend he drove down to Texas to ‘deal with personal matters that have been threatened by the civil unrest’, as per the only response he’s given us via email.”

“So, is he defecting to Texas when they secede?” a voice impatiently called out, temporarily forgetting the co-chair’s demand for orderly discussion.

“That’s unclear. We don’t want to give the false impression that there are active saboteurs among you, as that would introduce unnecessary biases in this group; and we can’t afford any schisms when it comes to the group that controls our national security. We will say that a sizable number of other conservative national representatives from Texas have also returned to Texas amidst this turmoil and, while we haven’t received any direct information linking national lawmakers to the potential secession, their timely absence has been factored into our calculations around the situation. I also want to point out that we still have Congresswoman Jackson present today and she’s been fully cooperative with our investigation.

The congresswoman hesitantly stood up when Director Paul pointed her out, made a slight nodding bow and addressed the room. “Yes, this is a terrible situation, but I’m afraid I didn’t

have much information to give them. I'm in the dark just as much as all of you, and I'm terrified of what's to become of my state." She quickly sat down before the tears started, fearful her grief would cause an unnecessary distraction for the meeting at hand.

A Tennessee Senator seated in the front row stepped into the momentary silence to redirect the conversation back to the presentation. "You said that there could be a reliable chance for us to separate and keep West Texas if a secession does occur. What would that look like since a vote from the state legislature would seemingly make the decision for the whole state?"

"Yes ma'am, good question. That will be covered under the tactical briefing led by General Milnus in the next presentation, which, if we don't have any other questions, we'll move into. Are there any other questions from the floor?"

Another hand timidly rose. It was Representative Keats, a relatively green politician from Wyoming. He was rather unceremoniously selected as a replacement for their former representative that had been murdered under mysterious circumstances at home after she'd dared to question the coup and ensuing dictatorship. When called upon, the young congressman slowly rose to speak from his position in the back of the room.

"H-he-hello everyone," he cleared his throat in an attempt to clear out his nervous stutter, "I was just wondering why we can't just stop the special legislative session and maybe detain any of the conspirators plotting to secede? I know it may sound a little unorthodox, but it seems like preventing this from happening at all would be the most straightforward and least costly option here."

Senator Marks stood up and cut off the intelligence agents before they had a chance to speak.

“If I may, I’d like to address part of that question first. We aren’t going to arrest anyone because nobody has broken any laws yet.” The retired astronaut spoke calmly, with every word carefully measured before being released. “If we start arresting politicians based on incomplete intelligence inferring to crimes that they may or may not commit, then we’ll have stepped onto a slippery path that we may never recover from. If we arrest this legislature, then we’d be setting a precedent where any politician could be arrested under the guise of preemptive risk mitigation. Remember that this was the same vein of logic used by the Traitor when he began targeting political opponents that spoke out against his election fraud. We will not go down that road because what’s to stop that logic from mutating and being turned against members in this room whenever we have disagreements? We’re here to preserve as many American liberties as we can, not to sacrifice them in the name of security. That’s how we got into this position in the first place.”

“Understood. Thank you, Senator.” The congressman sheepishly sat down having taken his gentle chastisement. Senator Taylor stared at Senator Marks in a brief moment of admiration. He hadn’t yet made up his mind whether or not he liked Marks or not. Marks had failed to condemn any of the actions of the Decimated during the war, and although he never explicitly stated it, seemed to approve of their Geneva Convention-violating tactics used to end the war. Senator Marks also seemed to never question the oftentimes overly aggressive decisions made by the Executive Council, usually opting to focus on the procedural minutiae of the meetings instead of addressing the ethical lines being skirted in the Executives’ decisions. Every now and again, though, Senator Marks would speak up and reveal his dedication to the same American values that Taylor also cherished.

“Yes, and to add to that,” Secretary Ezra stepped in to fill the conversation’s void, “any intervening action would most likely work against us. Any arrests made would embolden Texas leadership and potentially give them martyr status. They’d point to any concrete action as an example of their oppression by the federal government and add it to their growing list of ‘grievances’ used to rally more support. We’ve already seen similar patterns develop in trying to combat the Russian misinformation campaigns. Any attempts to directly shut down Russian propaganda sites or directly counterargue their misinformation seem to further alienate the Texas conservatives away from the U.S., as they interpret it as an affront to their freedom of speech or other rights.

The room was still, except for a few contemptuous shaking heads.

“If there are no other questions, we’ll hand this over to General Milnus for his presentation. Anyone? No more questions? General, the floor is yours.”

Chapter 23

I spoke to God today and She said that She's ashamed.

What have I become? What have I done?

I spoke to the Devil today, and He swears He's not to blame.

And I understood, because I feel the same.

Sebastian slid the key into the deadbolt lock and felt as each tooth lifted its pin. He pushed inward ever so slightly, turned the key clockwise, and listened as the tumbler effortlessly fell open. Even after twelve impossibly short years, his keys still worked. The heavy oaken door swung open in response to his gentle push as Sebastian stowed his smile away. Nothing would stand in his way now.

The front of the house was suspended in a darkened dusk, with the only compensating light barely illuminating strips of gloomed grays that seeped in through the cracks of the imperfectly flushed boards that adorned the flanks of windows. Aaron could hear the skitter of roaches across the walls as they took refuge from the coming storm and intruding light of the open door.

The pale light illuminated an entry marquee that read 'Welcome to Beauvoir' in giant, red, rebellious letters. The background had been painted to resemble a flying white flag, with the confederate 'stars and bars' tucked away in the upper corner and a vertical red stripe on the opposite border. Aaron mused at the delusional psychology. What kind of a loser names their fucking house? And what kind of inferiority complex had to be at play to name it after such a heinously treacherous site? He smirked at the layers of pending irony.

The door protested with a whimpering moan as Sebastian cautiously closed it behind Aaron, deepening the darkness that engulfed them. The pair snaked their way through the front of the house and Aaron could hear the sewer bugs scurry deeper

into the shadows as he followed Sebastian's incorporeal form through long, unoccupied rooms of unknown purpose or design. His eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness yet, and he let Sebastian's steps guide him with ephemeral creaks until they reached the stealthy saltillo tiles that delineated the kitchen and echoed a not-so-distant television newscast of the impending storm's threat.

They silently entered the kitchen that was overtaken by the storm's grayed light. The many windows in the back of the house didn't need to be boarded up against the northwestward-swirling winds that relentlessly beat against the front. Aaron looked out through the kitchen windows that overlooked the backyard full of trees and bushes that shook and swayed with the angry gusts. He approached the kitchen sink and saw that it overlooked a sunroom constructed out of a series of 6'x6' windows, with matching 2'x6' windows at floor level, each window impounded by ten-inch-thick, white, wooden beams. Through the thrashing branches and swirling debris, he could make out two faint figures reclining on the room's leather couch, illuminated by a couple of reading lamps and the TV's soft glow.

They rounded the kitchen counter jutting out and blocking passage to the couple chattering indistinct mumbles towards each other at the behest of the TV. Of course, the TV was tuned into FaKts News. Of course, the "news" channel had time to segue to segments of Traitorous lies about the ongoing coup amidst the emergency broadcasts covering the impending natural disaster.

With just a baseline's distance left to steal, the worn tendons in Sebastian's ankles began to give and snap, alerting the incoherent figures to their presence. The nearest one stood up to attention and spun around on his heels. Sebastian momentarily froze at the shifting situation.

“Sebastian, what’re you...” In a flash, his father saw all the wrathful intentions within Sebastian’s face and lunged for the shotgun lying on the ground next to his seat. Even faster, Sebastian closed the distance between them and snatched the weapon away from him before he could even raise it above his knees. He pumped the shotgun and ejected the loaded shell.

Sebastian let out a raucous roar. “What are you going to do with that!?”

He pumped the action back again and ejected the second shell. He shoved the buttstock into the man’s gut. The frail figure let out a heinous cry of pain as he keeled back to absorb the blow. Sebastian ejected the third and final round and locked the action forward. Over and over he smashed the buttstock into the pathetic man’s face until he could only gurgle out his whimpers for help through the mash of pummeled bones and teeth and gushing blood. The man sank to the ground as he desperately heaved for more air. Sebastian took the gun by the barrel and began clubbing his father’s spine with the wooden end as he convulsed on the ground.

His mother stood up in a panicked protest, but before she could let out an audible reproach, Aaron had swiftly closed the gap and cupped her throat with his free hand.

“I wouldn’t resist if I were you; it’ll only make things worse.” Aaron whispered into her ear as he explored her worn body with his pistol’s suppressor.

“Is that all you got?!” Sebastian wrathfully harassed the elderly figure as he discarded the weapon across the room. The man continued to emit ghastly gurgles as he clung to his breath.

Sebastian snatched his father up by the collar and began to choke him as his arms limply pawed at the iron statue that held him. Sebastian’s hands crossed in an over-under configuration as they gripped the opposite collars and squeezed with all his

force. His face and neck bulged and distorted as hidden veins and arteries transmuted him to his natural state, discoloring his leathery skin into deep reds and purples.

Aaron marveled at the sight. Sebastian posed as a powerful exemplar, juxtaposed against his father's grotesquely anemic form. How could something so forceful rise from something so fragile? Both shared essentially the same features, yet stood so diametrically opposed that they could never be classified as the same genus or even family. Both stood at about 6'4", but Sebastian's frame supported nearly twice as much mass - while Sebastian's unforgiving environments activated his furies and pushed him to accommodate more muscle to adapt, his father's insecurities had squandered away countless calories fretting over Sebastian's secrets that he could no longer control against. Sebastian's fiery crown flowed out in long curling tongues in a proud display that mocked his father's pathetic whips that had been smothered out with his dignity years ago. The father's eyes still burned an envious cobalt, though, while the life in Sebastian's had dulled to a murky hazel-denim. Sebastian's skin had darkened from years of freckling under the elements whereas his father's was a pasty white from cowering in the shadows, and the face continued to pale under Sebastian's chokehold. The hateful expressions that shone on their faces was where their features aligned, though; deep sunken cheeks, unsettling snarls, and leveled, searching eyes.

"SCREAM! FUCKING SCREEEEAAAAM!" The body dangled without resistance under Sebastian's forceful girders as he demanded his answers with ever-growing conviction. "What's the matter!?! It's not a fair fight now that I'm an adult, IS IT!?! Where's all of your fury now?!?"

Sebastian slammed the body down onto the stone top of the coffee table and heard the mortal crack as the skull gave way, forcing his father's mind to detach from its reality.

“FUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!!!” Sebastian’s curse went from a deep roar to a piercing scream as he realized what he had done. A lifetime of torment and his retribution was over in less than twenty seconds because of his gluttonous wrath. Sebastian tried to snatch the body back up and shake the life back into it in a furious fit.

“GOD FUCKING DAMN IT!” He tossed the body to the ground.

“SEBASTIAN!”

“WHAT?!”

“Is he still breathing? Does he have a pulse?”

Sebastian put his hand on the sunken cavity and lowered his head to listen for a sign of life.

“Yeah, he’s still here.”

“Ok then don’t worry. I’ve got some stuff in my kit that’ll wake him back up.”

Sebastian sighed. “Yeah, ok.” It wasn’t going to be the same. Whatever Aaron had would numb the senses and withhold the pain.

“Sebastian, we got another problem.” Aaron’s pistol was raised and pointed beyond Sebastian. Sebastian swiveled around to assess the threat.

Standing at the foot of the stairs was a lethargic Levi, his expression was vacant and distant.

“Sebastian, you came back?” Levi’s voice remained apathetic as he approached the macabre scene. “But why now?”

“Levi,” Sebastian’s voice began to stumble as he tried to grasp the surrealism, “what are you doing here? Why aren’t you in Nashville?”

"I got laid off. Mom told me to come down here because she could introduce me to someone with a job."

"But you know there's a cat 5 approaching, right?" Sebastian picked up his discarded pistol and held it behind his back.

Levi looked out the windows to witness the chaos. "Huh, I guess there is."

"Sebastian, what is happening?"

Sebastian shot a pleading look to Aaron and gave a subtle wave with his hand to hold off his accomplice. He had seen shades of this look too many times before and thought it was somewhat remarkable that Aaron couldn't recognize a face he wore with such familiarity. This one was different, though. Sebastian couldn't tell if it was the prescription drugs or the self-medicating this time, but Levi was gone. It was as if his spirit had already left the body, and no other demon or malfeasance dared to occupy the open vacancy, for fear of what new depths of self-hatred they might discover within. Just an empty form cursed to wander the earth without a consciousness or purpose.

"Levi, how long have you been here?"

"I don't know, a couple of weeks?" Levi kept his vacant stare out the window, captivated by the twirling leaves.

"When did you get laid off?"

Levi's gaze dropped to the floor as he stopped to think about the distant memory. "July? I think?" He looked back up to register his mother's tearful face shivering in the corner.

"What's wrong with mom?"

"Levi...listen...I didn't return for you."

"What happened to dad? Why is he on the floor?"

“Levi!” Sebastian stepped forward and confronted his brother head on. “Listen, I’m not here for you. I came back for them. Our country is falling apart, and I’ve been recruited to execute domestic terrorists. These two are some of the worst offenders and they’ve been actively spreading propaganda and financing terrorist cells.”

Sebastian could see the activity lighting up behind Levi’s eyes as his synapses fired off and tried to connect his memories to the figure standing in front of him. “Hmph, fucking boom-boom babies, right Sebastian?”

“Yeah, Levi,” Sebastian’s smile broke as the first tears began to stream down, “fucking boom-boom babies.”

“Hey Sebastian?” The understanding began to grow in Levi’s face as he made his connections.

“Yeah?” Sebastian stared into his brother’s face and watched as he began to step into his lucid dream.

“You aren’t here because of what they did to your country, are you?”

“No.” Sebastian looked down in shame. “I’m here because of what they did to us.”

“What they did to *you*.”

Sebastian stood there, stupefied at the doped-up oracle that suddenly saw everything.

“It’s ok. I should have been a better big brother to you. I was just a confused kid, too, you know. I’m glad you’re finally getting your justice, though. I know how important that is to you.” Levi paused before looking through Sebastian. “This means you’re leaving for good though, right?” Levi spoke matter-of-factly, like a child unencumbered by social expectations.

“Yeah Levi, I’m leaving for good.”

Levi's dilated pupils had overtaken the hues of emerald and pear, forming deep abyssal voids that greedily searched for more light and sense. "Sebastian, I'm a mess. Who's going to take care of me?"

"I will, Levi. I will."

Levi looked down at the pistol with its long suppressor dangling in Sebastian's hand and deepened his smile. "I understand."

Levi lifted Sebastian's merciful hand to guide it to his last rites.

"Thank you, Sebastian."

"Hey, Sebastian?" Sebastian removed his finger from the trigger as Levi's spirit fought for one last chance to be heard from under the mire.

"Yeah, Levi?"

"I'm sorry." Levi's eyes lowered. "I'm sorry for everything."

"I know. I'm sorry too." The tears streamed down Sebastian's face but his voice remained steady. "I'm sorry I gave up. I'm sorry I abandoned you."

Levi gave a knowing nod and a constipated smile. "I don't know how to say it, Sebastian."

"I know. We'll figure it out later, I promise. I'll find you on the other side. I promise I won't let anything bad happen to you over there."

"Are we going to start the farm on the other side?" Levi stared back with hopeful eyes.

"Yeah, we'll have a farm on the other side and I'll have an orchard out back." Sebastian's smile broke free.

"That sounds nice. I think I'll get a horse to ride over to see you and your dogs." Levi's face showed no more remorse, no more resentment, only reconciliation and hope. "I'm ready, Sebastian."

The metallic clinks of the pistol's slide completing its cycle echoed in the room, softened by the suppressor's harsh breath. Sebastian forced himself to watch the body fall back and release its final grasp on his brother's spirit. He mouthed out his mournful penance as he stood over the limp pile that had splayed out into an unrecognizable form.

"The suffering stops with me."

Sebastian felt a sigh of relief at the final sacrament he was able to offer Levi, but felt a sharp premonition for his own future; there would be no one to administer his own final mercy when his time came after this war. Not that he would deserve it. He strode to the kitchen and turned on the faucet. There was a cold tinge of metallic contamination from the cold water as it dripped down his face and bled into his mouth. Sebastian ripped off a paper towel from the wall mount and wiped his face dry. He released a heavy sigh and made his way back to the ongoing liturgy. His face showed no signs of distress; he had mastered his mother's secrets.

Sebastian's mother sat, petrified in her seat at the end of the couch while Aaron stood off to the side leaning on a supporting column, waiting to perform his acolytic duties. Sebastian dutifully approached the scene and took his place in the overstuffed armchair that sat opposite his mother. His cathedra had been upholstered in a soft leather, tanned to a rich amber with tones of red that contrasted against his hardened scales.

"Hello, Chastity. I'm assuming you understand why we're here."

"Sebastian...I...I don't..." His mother trembled at the face that stared back at her, void of everything except for unadulterated hate. "Se....hon...Sebastian, why..."

"Well, spit it out!"

"Why are you doing this?!" Her arms splayed out in an explanatory gesture as she broke down into her sobs.

“We’re doing this because I’ve been tasked with removing toxic cancers like you from my country. As an enlistment bonus, though, I specifically requested you two as my first targets. I think you can figure out why.”

“Sebastian, I don’t understand!” She kept sobbing. Sebastian marveled at how she was able to turn on the tears so effortlessly when it suited her defensive needs.

“Oh, come now, Chastity. Now’s not the time for your silly games. It’s just me and you now.”

“Stop calling me that! I’m your moth...” Before she could finish her thought, Sebastian had leapt across the table to deliver an open-palmed rebuke. His rage had sacrificed his accuracy and the blow landed flat against her ear. Her eardrum burst and her brain rattled within her skull as she reeled back from her first penance.

“YOU HAVE NO SON! YOU NEVER DID! Because you never bothered to act like a mother!” His wrathful rage subsided as he recollected his bearing and took a seat on the room’s central feature, a tabular slab of massive black labradorite held up by two giant triangular feet.

“You know, I used to think that I hated only him,” Sebastian pointed downwards at his father, still twitching from the involuntary spasms, “I used to believe that he was the source of all of our suffering,” He gestured over towards his brother’s lifeless form, “I used to take pity on you. I thought you were a victim in all of this, just like me and Levi. That was why I still tried to stay connected to you, even after I’d broken free from his grasp. And do you remember how you repaid me for that kindness?”

“No...Sebastian...I”

“You continued to push me to reconcile with him! Over and over and over, you violated my one fucking boundary!”

Sebastian held out his index finger and repeatedly poked it into her dazed face, "You expected me to keep giving to him, to sacrifice my last shred of sanity so that you wouldn't have to go through the shame of explaining to the world what you had allowed him to do to us!" Sebastian stood up to shake out the excess energies. "Then, when I had finally had enough and broke contact, you began to poison Levi against me so that you could reinforce his bondage without my threat!"

"Sebastian, I didn't know." Chastity held her head low, unable to confront her accuser head-on with her tired lie.

"You didn't know what, Chastity?!" Sebastian's nostrils flared and his face coiled forward to directly oppose the falsehoods. He palmed the back of her head and forced her to stare down his demon. "You know, a monster is going to monster, that's just in his nature; but what do you call it when a human mother sacrifices her children to that monster, over and over and over again? Without remorse? Without fail? Just to ease her own punishments from the monster?" Sebastian swiveled her face back to his. "What's that sin called? Is there a word for that in your stupid fucking catechism?! Huh, CHASTITY?!?"

"Sebastian, I didn't know!" Her face was drenched in fear but void of shame.

"YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHAT, CHASTITY?!? SPEAK YOUR EVIL!" Sebastian snatched her by her hair and spun her around to look out at the eroding mound that stuck out over gathering puddles, overgrown with grass. "You didn't see him launching rockets at our faces?!" He spun her further left, "I saw you right there in that kitchen window, watching us, saying nothing!" He tangled her hair tighter into his grasp and twisted her around; she yelped and reactively shot up her hands to grasp the arm that had lifted her from the ground. "Or did you not see what he was doing to me in there?!" Sebastian pointed an accusatory finger to the sepulchral master bedroom.

“Did you forget that my room was above yours? Did you not know that I could hear you?” Chastity’s eyes widened as the realizations began to dawn on her.

“Yes, that’s right, I could hear everything. I heard your pathetic little accusation. You understood exactly what you had walked in on but chose to accept his blatant lies and opt for the protection of ignorance. Why didn’t you ever ask me what happened, Chastity?” Sebastian smiled, “But I also heard what he did to you afterwards for your ‘insinuation’. You deserved it, though, you know.”

“I didn’t know!”

Sebastian ignored the worn refrain and continued with his prosecution. “You deserved every last thrust. You deserved every last tear that you shed behind that locked door when you thought no one was around to hear you. You deserved all of that!” Sebastian noticed the heart palpitations that had overtaken him behind the rush of adrenaline and paused to gather his breath. He wanted his sentencing to be clear and concise, without the taint of his rage. “But I didn’t deserve it; and Levi didn’t deserve whatever heinous crimes that destroyed him. We didn’t deserve to be sacrificed to his narcissistic compulsions.”

“But it wasn’t my fault! It was all him! I didn’t do anything!”

“That’s absolutely right. You didn’t do anything. You chose to sit by his side at every Sunday service and help him construct his silly little lie that we were a happy little family. At least you got to comfort yourself with the prestige and superiority that came from being a doctor’s wife, even if you were just his little fucktoy. Do you know what we got?”

Chastity continued to mutter her tired refrain towards nowhere in particular.

“We got nothing! We understood that no adult would believe us as long as you complied with his alibi. All we needed was one adult to believe us and tell us that it was all fucked. You could have been that adult! But that would have required you to admit your cowardice and shame. Instead, we had to choke on your perverted definition of love and adapt our worldview around it.”

“There was nothing I could do!” Chastity continued to try to defend herself with the same empty excuse that Saturn’s wives must have used when he devoured their children.

“You had every opportunity to leave him! You had two loving parents that would have taken us in! Two sisters that would have comforted you! You were a boom-boom baby with a college degree! The world was yours to take! But you chose to stay so that you didn’t have to confront the world with your shame!”

“But I didn’t do anything! It was all him!”

“That’s right, you didn’t do anything. You were a coward who had the audacity to condemn Levi for turning to drugs and then turn around and encourage my violent manifestations with giddy laughter. What? Did you secretly think I was going to get strong and come back to rescue you after all of that?”

Sebastian stood up and pointed towards his brother’s corpse.

“You know, both of us will reach the same ending with our paths, and neither of us got to experience joy or love on our journeys. That wasn’t our fault, though. It was yours. You were tasked with instilling love within us, and you shunned your duties.”

The mercuric cinnabar of Sebastian’s neck glistened as it oxidized from the tears that swept across the freshly exposed surface. With one swift but forceful motion, Sebastian lifted his mother up in his arms and laid her on top of the table’s cold surface. The blackened labradorite iridesced crystalline cyans

and smokey alabasters underneath her waves of obsidian hair. He clamped down on her neck as Aaron stepped forward. She wriggled and resisted as Aaron shot another knowing hand between her thighs while he held her feet down.

“You know, I was never able to quite find the word that described this type of betrayal, so tell me, Chastity; what’s it like to know that the one person in this world who’s meant to protect you, has offered you up as a sacrifice? What’s it like to be violated as your flesh and blood looks on unaffected?” Sebastian relocated his hand to her shoulder to offer her one last chance to confess her sins.

“It wasn’t me! I didn’t know! It was all him!” defiant and unremorseful, even in her final moments. Sebastian smirked and smashed her mouth in with the butt of his pistol to end her impious lies.

“You know, your religion claims that your God is omnipotent...omnipresent...omniscient; they claim that he knows the thoughts and desires deep within every man’s heart. What makes you believe that you’ll get into heaven when you can’t even stand up to my judgement? Do you honestly believe that you’ll be able to fool him with your lie? Do you think that you’ll just say this over and over again and he’ll just believe you and let you go?”

There it was. Buried underneath the carnage and blood-flows was the expression that Sebastian had been searching for. The face that told him his willpower had overtaken her faith. Her afterlife was his and she knew it. Sebastian motioned to Aaron and his hands came to rest at her ankles.

“Don’t worry. I would never visit that evil upon Aaron,” relief crept into Chastity’s expression, “but you will be punished. Your death will be a mercy that you don’t deserve, so I want you to know this before I send you. Ruth has forwarded all of the same emails and donated to all of the same groups as your husband,

and she's been targeted for elimination by the government. Aunt Faith and Uncle Mark, Aunt Hope and Uncle Steve, the Smiths, the McCallisters, the Johnsons, the Martins, the Roberts; all of them have composite scores that make them targets. A few were borderline, but I recommended them for culling because of their connection to *you*. All of them will be deleted within a week. As a mercy to the children and warning to others, we'll be eliminating the entire family units. Within a week's time, all of your direct blood relations will be gone. Within seven days, everyone that would ever speak your name again will be eliminated and I will be the only one that carries your memory." Sebastian took in a deep breath to savor the smile. "You'll be like a ripple in the sand out there in the gulf – wiped out in an instant with a completely inconsequential impact on this world; a whisper that no one heard."

Aaron let go of her feet and removed his pack to begin searching for something.

"That's the most fitting punishment for such a wasted and cowardly life. And as soon as this war is over and my country no longer needs me, I'll be punching my own ticket; and when I get to the other side, I'ma fuck up that little bitch that you call God, and I'm gonna march my happy ass down to Hell, give Satan a slap on the ass, and I'm going to personally oversee your torments; and when I've grown tired of what I have planned for you, I'm going to spend lifetimes scouring the hellscape, searching for new and creative ways to exact my retribution from you."

Aaron freed a tire iron from the tangled pack and tossed it to Sebastian before grabbing her feet again. In one swift strike, Sebastian brought the metal down and splintered her shins, the wound of the Innocents. Chastity screamed out in agony but evoked no reaction from the pair.

Sebastian held out her arm over the edge of the table and brought his tool downwards until it sent her arm in a 90° bend in the wrong direction. Chastity began to drift in and out of consciousness as he made his way to the other side and repeated his procedure.

Chastity's eyes rolled back as she succumbed to the shock. Her husband's body had since stopped convulsing and laid limply on the floor.

Aaron paused with reverent silence at the results of Sebastian's unadulterated hatred before talking. "Well, that's it then? Time to burn it down?"

"Not quite yet. Were you serious when you said you could wake them back up?" Sebastian's face remained empty underneath the streaks of blood and tears shed for his brother.

"They've lost quite a bit of blood, but I've got something that can probably get them up for maybe another 5-10 minutes."

"Then that'll have to do. Help me move these bodies."

I heard from God today and She sounded just like me.

What have I done? Who have I become?

I saw the Devil today and He looked a lot like me.

I looked away.

I turned away.

Chapter 24

"To change the racial mix of the country; that's the reason. To reduce the political power of people whose ancestors lived here and dramatically increase the proportion of Americans newly arrived from the third world...In political terms, this policy is called The Great Replacement; the replacement of legacy Americans with more obedient people from far away countries."

-Fox 'News' talk show host, Tucker Carlson,
September 22, 2021

"If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing."

-Malcom X

"You will not replace us! White lives matter! Blood and soil!"

-Chants from white supremacists at Unite the Right rally, Charlottesville, SC, August 11-12, 2017

"You can't have capitalism without racism."

-Malcolm X

General Milnus stood up and smoothed out the sharp creases in his trousers and approached the front of the room. You could hardly notice the monochromatic army green of his jacket hiding underneath the field of ribbons, awards, and insignia acquired over his forty-year career.

“Yes, thank you to Deputy Director Paul and Secretary Ezra for bringing us up to speed on the current situation.” The intelligence officers gave an acknowledging nod from their post from the side of the room. “As they demonstrated, there are a lot of variables at play in Texas right now and that means multiple dynamic situations unfolding that we’re currently trying to contain. I’m going to come back to these first few slides, but I want to skip ahead to what our main priority is right now.”

The general clicked through the slides until he landed on a map of Texas with a series of circles that each covered roughly 100-mile diameters at the map’s 1:500,000 scale. They didn’t appear to have any discernible pattern or connection to the riots displayed in the previous presentation, nor did they seem to be related to any of the metropolitan centers at the heart of the discussion. Instead, they just seemed to be randomly scattered across the state.

“There are currently 38 nuclear missiles remaining in Texas. For security reasons, this map is not an exact representation of the missile locations, but is being shown to give you a general sense of the situation and how far we have to move them. Coinciding with the start of Texas’ rapid destabilization about two months ago, we began evacuating our nuclear assets from the state. To date, we’ve disarmed 110 weapons, but these 38 still remain. Evacuating these weapons is priority number one right now because we cannot allow a nuclearized Texas, especially given their levels of hostility against the U.S. All necessary assets have been deployed to recover these weapons but removing them without detection will be a difficult task. We believe that if the Texas National Guard or Texas political leadership discovers that we’re removing these weapons from their territory, then there’s a high probability that they’ll preemptively attack us. Therefore, we have three stealth fighter squadrons and twenty special operations teams standing by as QRF, excuse me, as

Quick Reactionary Forces, to stop any potential witnesses by any means necessary. If these fail and a preemptive attack is triggered, we have three Marine battalions on standby at Air Force bases outside of Roswell, Abilene, and Shreveport to counter any hostile forces. Attached to the battalion in Abilene, Texas is the recommissioned First Marine Tank Battalion. Additionally, we have an undisclosed number of local Decimated teams that have been loosely organized with limited information in case we need additional egress support.”

The general looked out across the room to see all eyes glued to the screens.

“The remaining warheads have a nuclear payload of two megatons or greater and this larger size makes an undetected relocation much more difficult and has been the main factor in why they haven’t been removed yet. We’ll be moving them out using a combination of road and rail systems. All weapons have already been dismantled and prepared for transport and all transportation will be completed within the next 72 hours. Once all warheads have been removed, a series of thermal charges set along the host rockets will be remotely detonated simultaneously, rendering the rockets completely inoperable. Following this, a series of shape charges at the mouth of the missile silos will be detonated, triggering implosions that will bury the rockets and housing silos.”

The General searched the room with his grave eyes. “Does anyone have any questions or comments about the current measures that we’ve taken to secure our nuclear arsenal in Texas?”

The room was dead silent. Nobody moved. All eyes were focused on the general. His words had paralyzed the room with fear as the true gravity of the situation was dawning on the committee.

“Good. These actions have been unanimously authorized by the Executive Council and this is the only course of action here where there’s no room for error. Senators, please execute voting procedures for the record.”

Both Senators Taylor and Marks were still recovering from the shock that had just been delivered. It was all so disconcerting to hear the general spell it out so matter-of-factly with an emotionless delivery that added to the surrealism of the situation. Senator Marks was the first to recover.

“Yes, ahem, um any committee members that have an objection to the actions enacted by the Executive Council regarding the removal of the nuclear arsenal from Texas, speak now. Silence will be understood as consent for the actions.”

The room stood still. The air was heavy with nervous anticipation of whatever horrifying new realities the general might share with them next.

“If there are no objections, then the actions have hereby been accepted with unanimous consent from the committee. General, the floor is yours.”

General Milnus nodded and clicked back to a previous slide.

“Once all nuclear weapons have been successfully evacuated, combat forces will remain on standby at military bases around the state and will remain on high alert for the next two weeks or until Texas announces a decision to secede. Marine and National Guard units that are currently deployed to quell civil unrest in major metropolitan areas will remain deployed on their current mission and will continue operating out of forward operating bases near their areas of operations, or AOs, and will be resupplied from an airfield outside of Oklahoma City. All nonessential equipment and personnel have been evacuated from all federal military installations across Texas. These military bases will be guarded by combat-ready forces. If

Texas announces secession, they will immediately evacuate the bases via mass convoys, escorted by attached air support, to bases in Oklahoma and New Mexico where they'll be redeployed with a main force on Texas's western front. All infrastructure at federal military bases in Texas will be left intact in case we need to reestablish them for a military invasion into Texas. Like I said though, all equipment will have already been evacuated and nothing will be left behind that could possibly be used against us."

The general looked out into the crowd to field questions, but all eyes remained fixated on him. He clicked back to the first slide of his presentation and continued.

"This is a map of strategic priorities in Texas. In the far west portion of Texas is the Permian oil basin. In South Texas, there's the bulk of the Eagle Ford Shale oil basin. To the north, in Amarillo is our strategic helium reserve. These three are the top three Texas strategic resource centers that we're concerned with and we're confident that we'll be able to maintain them through a west Texas schism. Our helium reserves are effectively immobile, which is why we have a dedicated command base for an army regiment and F-32 squadron centered here. In a worst-case scenario where we aren't able to separate west Texas, all lands north of the Red Dog River will be declared Oklahoma territory under legitimacy of the Adams-Onís treaty, like so."

The slide progressed to show the ragged river boundary separating Oklahoma and Texas extend west into the Texas panhandle.

"However, all strategic scenarios place a 90% confidence interval for north and west Texas remaining with the United States." The general clicked again, and an opaque green overlay appeared, covering the entirety of the western Texas territory up to an eastern boundary that ran from Wichita Falls to

Abilene to San Angelo, and south along Highway 277 to the Mexican border. "Strategic scenarios give us a 62% to 86% confidence interval that southern Texas will be included in this split" He clicked again and this time an opaque purple overlay stretching from San Angelo to San Antonio to Corpus Christi was plastered onto the map. "Our strategic scenarios give a 38% to 53% confidence interval that parts of central Texas will reject this secession and remain with the U.S." He clicked again and a light gray sliver with hashed lines appeared on the map. It crested in Abilene and tapered southwards to San Antonio and Austin and then continued south to the gulf coast at the same width. "If we maintain the oil fields in west and south Tex.."

"General, I have a question." Senator Taylor felt his inner being leave his body to witness him go against every instinct and interrupt the general's presentation.

"Yes, senator."

"You keep talking about these scenarios wherein we're able to separate east and west Texas, but I'm still trying to figure out what exactly that would entail? If the Texas state legislature votes to secede, then presumably they will be speaking for the whole state. How do you plan on *peacefully* separating Texas into these factions?" Senator Taylor had consistently been one of the more outspoken committee members when it came to restraining the overzealous aggression the Executive Committee was prone to, and he had made it a clear expectation that they presented diplomatic solutions wherever possible.

"Ah yes, now's as good a time as any to get into that." General Milnus skipped ahead in the presentation to a slide that had side by side district maps for the state senate and state house. The key read as follows:

Green – Districts with strong pro-U.S. sentiments in the populace

Light Green – Districts with moderately strong pro U.S. sentiments in the populace

Green with hatching – pro U.S. sentiments in populace, but pro-secession representation

Red – Districts with strong anti-U.S. sentiments in the populace

Grey – roughly equal sentiments found within the populace.

Light Red – Districts with moderately strong anti-U.S. sentiments in the populace

Red with hatching – anti-U.S. sentiments in populace, but pro-U.S. representation.

“Much of this intelligence comes from Secretary Ezra’s team, so Secretary, if you hear me say something that needs to be corrected, please step in and fix it. As we can see, the same general patterns emerge in these maps that we saw in the civil unrest maps. In the western half of the state, we see districts strongly in favor of staying with the U.S.; we also see a strong correlation between these pro-U.S. sentiments within the population and in their representation, both in the state senate and representative districts, with very little deviation between the maps. Additionally, we have had a significant portion of state senators and representatives within these districts reach out to us, independently, to report the accumulating rumors about a Texas secession. Interviews with these political leaders all collaborate with the same intelligence that we’ve been gathering, and they all appear to share a similar concern for what it would mean for their districts if the legislature does vote to secede. Each of them have expressed a willingness to cooperate with the federal government in the event of a secession, although we’ve provided them with extremely limited information about the current developments as a measure to control panic and reactionary actions. We have

identified one state senator from Texas's nineteenth district to lead a concurrent separatist movement, selected in part by a considerable contingent of the Texan politicians that we interviewed, all indicating a deferment to his leadership. Additionally, he's also the leading figure of a group of six prominent house representatives that would be very influential in this movement. His district also covers most of southwest Texas and selecting him as the leader of the movement would be very advantageous for our push in southern Texas districts. This senator has been briefed on a secession eventuality and has agreed to be the figurehead of our separatist movement in the event of a vote to secede."

The general paused, looked back at Senator Taylor and sincerely asked, "Is this acceptable to you so far, Senator?"

Senator Taylor simply nodded, waiting for the violent part.

"We have undercover teams deployed around the Austin area keeping tabs on the leaders that have expressed willingness to cooperate with us. In the event of a Texas secession, these teams will be activated, secure the politicians, and escort them to extraction sites where they'll be airlifted to secure locations. We've already prepared a speech for the senator from district 19 to present within three hours of a secession announcement. This speech will declare the districts that we've secured political support in as a separated state from Texas and declare the new state as a remaining member of the Union. He'll call for the formation of a new state government with a capitol either in San Antonio or Midland. Which city will be selected will depend on how much of southern Texas we can immediately secure. San Antonio will be a more meaningful place to locate the capitol and help shore up support for this new state, but if there's not a large enough buffer between San Antonio and east Texas, then we'll move it to Midland to prevent provoking armed conflicts along the southeastern border."

Again, the general looked at Senator Taylor and was met with a silent nod to continue. He clicked to the next slide showing a map detailing military movements.

“Concurrent with the Texas senator’s speech, we’ll have a coordinated movement to secure the eastern borders of this new state. Army infantry, ranger, and armor units have been reserved to deploy around the major metropolitan areas in the south, specifically San Antonio, Corpus Christi, and possibly Austin, on an ad hoc basis. Army mechanized infantry companies will be deployed to blockade and set up forward operating bases at each major highway along this border. Light infantry platoons will be deployed from these bases to control movement on the smaller roadways along the border. From the Air Force, the 1st, 4th, and 8th Fighter Wings, along with 9th Reconnaissance Wing and the 24th and 27th Special Operations Wings operating out of airfields in Roswell, New Mexico; Altus, Oklahoma; and Abilene, Texas will be available to provide aerial support for these units. Along the coast we’ll have Aegis cruisers, submarines, and two LHA carriers move in to blockade the coastal border, however far east the terminus is set. On the carriers, we’ll have a Marine Expeditionary Unit to act as a QRF and provide additional support where needed. There will also be Army Airborne units in Fort Benning, Georgia, and Marine infantry battalions in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina on standby to stop any potential violence that may break out across Texas’s eastern border; however, if armed conflict does breakout, we expect it to be reactionary, disorganized, and mainly targeted at the separated Texas districts to the west.”

The general paused and turned to singularly address Senator Taylor.

“This is what our strategists have determined to be the course of action to have the least number of civilian casualties and the best chance for mitigating our chances of seeing a fully armed conflict. An immediate counter-separatist movement coupled

with strong military posturing will disorient the east Texas secessionists and cripple their movement before they have a chance to respond. This also creates the possibility that their political leaders will recant on the secession vote once they realize we've cut them off from oil resources and large swaths of cattle ranching that they've already leveraged against in their negotiations with Russia."

"Uh-huh, and what if either the political leadership or the population of east Texas take this as an act of aggression and immediately begin indiscriminately attacking cities in nearby states?" While the general had been talking, Senator Taylor had been racing through the possible scenarios that could result from these actions and searching for possible alternatives. In every scenario he foresaw diplomacy failing because he knew that talking doesn't work when radicalized factions had already set their minds to violence. Deep down, he knew that everything the general was saying was true, and even possibly that the proposed response was too mild, but couldn't let this go without, at the very least, opening a dialogue in the room for other alternatives.

"Well, senator, that question leads me into discussing our first-strike options, but before I do that, I want to make sure that we're all in agreement about this course of action. Are there any proposals for alternate actions?"

Senator Taylor searched across the floor, hoping for a solution that had been kept from him. Besides a few uneasy shuffles, the room was silent.

"I guess I was hoping for someone to have an idea for a less heavy-handed option here, general. I've been trying to come up with a way for diplomacy to work, but they all fall short. Your proposal may seem like the best course, but I'm terrified that military provocation is going to reignite our war." The senator looked out across the room with watering eyes, hoping that

someone would verbalize a better solution that could wholly prevent the possibility of a secession. His hopes went unanswered.

The general nodded and gave a measured sigh. "I know, senator. The Executive Committee is burdened by our decisions just as much as you are." The general spoke with absolute sincerity in his voice. "I don't want Texas to secede. I wish the very act of secession could be seen by all for what it truly is, an abhorrent, anti-American act to be avoided at all costs, but here we are. The Executive Branch has been strategizing this possibility for months now, and this is the best, most peaceful course of action."

Senator Taylor softly replied, "I know. I have no objections to your proposal."

Senator Marks continued with procedure. "I motion that we vote to approve the actions presented by General Milnus. Are there any objections to his planned course of action or parts therein?"

The floor remained silent. Senator Marks looked down the table at his co-chair. Senator Taylor gave him a weak wave of the hand and anemic "No" before looking down in shame.

"If there are no objections from the committee, then the general's plan, as presented, has been accepted by the committee with unanimous consent. General, the floor is yours."

"Thank you, senator. In addition to the accepted plan, we have a number of offensive options to further hinder Russian objectives and limit Texas's military capabilities to limit their immediate threat to surrounding states." General Milnus clicked ahead to his slide containing the map of strategic priorities in Texas. "As pointed out earlier, Russia's main objectives are to control Texas fuel resources, access additional

agricultural resources, establish an Atlantic naval port for their fleet, and to exert military pressure from a proximal location. If we maintain control of west and south Texas, we'll maintain control of the Permian and Eagle Ford oil & gas basins as well as a majority of the lands dedicated to beef and grains production. This would be a significant blow to Russia's top two priorities. However, right here on the Louisiana border, there are two major refinery ports at Beaumont and Port Arthur. Combined, these two refinery centers can process over one million barrels of oil per day. We recommend sending in an army regiment supported by a strong naval blockade to immediately annex Beaumont and Port Arthur as a part of Louisiana."

The general stopped and addressed the only person brave enough to confront him.

"Senator Taylor, I understand that you want to limit aggressive actions to limit civil tensions, but the Executive Council highly recommends this option for multiple reasons; 1) it would limit Texas oil production capabilities to where they'd be producing at a significant deficit relative to what they've already promised to Russia, forcing them to dedicate their limited production to domestic use and remove one of their only remaining revenue sources available to buy military hardware from Russia; 2) This would take away Texas's main economic draw and deter foreign investments, causing severe economic contractions in Texas that we predict will cause unrest within the populace and push them back towards our side; 3) loss of these refineries will make it cost-prohibitive for production to continue from these Louisiana and Mississippi oil fields out here on the continental shelf, causing economic unrest in those states; and 4) we need the production from these refineries to continue supplying our own power systems. Without these refineries, drastic energy shortages will ensue for markets in the Midwest and southeast, further destabilizing our cities and significantly increasing the possibility for more outbreaks of civil unrest."

Senator Taylor spoke up, “And what would annexing parts of Texas mean for us diplomatically, both internationally and within east Texas?”

“Internationally-speaking, this will have little to no diplomatic consequences outside of Russia. Due to the area’s relatively small size and proximity to the Louisiana border, most countries won’t bother with this because it will be too subtle to draw concern. Russia is the only country that will understand the consequences of this and they’ll most likely protest, but even Russia-aligned countries will have trouble selling this as a problem to their people and we’ll lose very little, diplomatically-speaking. Within Texas, the citizenry may take this as an affront and have local pockets of violence, but on the whole, the population won’t understand what this means and they’ll most likely remain focused on the western half of the state that separated. Political leadership will understand what this loss means and they may retaliate with military force, which leads me to our second offensive option.”

The general clicked to the next slide showing a map of Texas military bases.

“Federal military bases will be abandoned if Texas secedes, but their infrastructure will remain in place. However, Texas National Guard bases indicated by these red dots will remain under Texan control and will retain their capabilities. An option that we have here is to bomb the equipment and vehicle yards found on these bases to render them ineffective. This would effectively remove the option for a military strike from seceding political leadership. Our analysts have put the chances at less than 20% that Texas leaders will choose to lash out with a military strike, but this is still a significant chance. However, if they do choose a military option, we’ll have advanced warning and sufficient countermeasures in place to eliminate any threats before they cross the Texas border, leaving the risk for American casualties at marginally low percentages. We

recommend leaving their military capabilities intact as defensive measures against foreign interests that are hostile to both the U.S. and Texas. If Texas, does decide to lash out, we'll be able to eliminate their entire military capabilities swiftly in a self-defense counterstrike that annihilates the entire Texas military and could prove to be beneficial for our image in the Texan psyche."

The general clicked ahead to a slide showing another Texas map, this one with emboldened highways and symbolized ports and other vital infrastructure.

"This brings me to our last two offensive options. Depending on where the separation line is drawn, there will be between thirty-five to fifty-five major roadways and approximately one and a half times as many minor roads connecting the Two Texas halves. Our analysts recommend destroying all of these access points immediately upon separating the two halves as a psychological measure to solidify the idea that these are two completely separate states. On the Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Louisiana borders, there will be forty-two major roadways leading out of east Texas. Our analysts have recommended destroying thirty of the forty-two roadways and keeping twelve key access points across the Red and Sabine Rivers that we can control, like so." General Milnus clicked again and thirty red x's appeared across the east Texas border. "This will allow us to control migrations out of east Texas while maintaining security checkpoints that will search for possible vigilante-style individuals or groups looking to cross over and launch terrorist-style attacks on nearby cities. The Executive Council recommends that both of these actions be executed immediately following an announcement of secession."

"Finally, we have major ports and shipyards on the Texas Gulf Coast. These ports are key to all of Russia's objectives. Right now, we have the option to destroy vital port infrastructure and render them inoperable for years. We can have on-the-

ground forces waiting for orders to evacuate the ship and container yards and provide a two-hour window for this evacuation to minimize civilian casualties. Following this evacuation period, naval bombardments and aerial bombings will commence on all port infrastructure along the coast. This first-strike option is expected to have significant diplomatic backlash, both internationally and in Texas. An unprovoked aggression like this is likely to solidify Texans against the U.S. and could even turn west Texas districts against us. However, immediately following a secession may be the only window of opportunity that we have. Russian ships are likely to immediately start occupying port space as a part of pre-arranged agreements and attacks on these ports could then spark a war with Russia. On the other hand, if we attack these ports before they're occupied, in conjunction with seizing the refineries at Beaumont and Port Arthur, we'll have effectively eliminated all of the economic and strategic value to Russia, deterring them from remaining in our backyard."

The general turned to the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen of the committee, that's my presentation. I yield the podium for debate."

The ensuing debate was unceremonious. After ten short minutes of half-hearted calls for restraint, the committee decided to authorize the seizing of Beaumont and Port Arthur as well as authorize the recommended destruction of most of the roadways out of Texas. An impassioned plea from Congresswoman Jackson swayed enough members of the committee to let the coastal ports stand so that east Texans would be able to access supplies and trade necessary for their survival.

Chapter 25

*'Cause I need to watch things die from a distance
Vicariously I, live while the whole world dies.
You all need it too, don't lie.
Why can't we just admit it?*

"Hey Sebastian, what do you think we'll find on the other side?"

"Other side of what?" Sebastian didn't bother looking up at Aaron as he continued his dousing.

"The other side of death. Do you really believe that there's a god on the other side?" Aaron had always assumed that Sebastian was atheist and never bothered to ask him about his beliefs on the afterlife, but his interest had piqued after listening to his lecture to his mother.

"Oh Jesus, I hope they aren't right about the other side."

"Seriously? I wouldn't have pegged you to be the god-fearing type. Honestly, I kind of believed you when you said you were going to fuck him up."

"Oh, no it's not that. Yeah, there's not a doubt in my mind that I'd fuck him up if he was real. I'm not jealous of your childhood in the slightest, but at least you didn't have to deal with *that* mindfuck."

"Yeah, I haven't met too many happy Christians. Seems like it breaks you if you fully buy into it."

Sebastian lifted his canister as Aaron followed him into the master bedroom to continue preparing his entombed tormentors.

"Yeah, they trap you pretty early on with the singular choice of this eternal paradise or eternal damnation; it's kind of insane the shit they push onto children."

Aaron let out a bemused chuckle. "Yeah, I've heard that 'now I lay me down to sleep' shit they indoctrinate you with. Fucking savage."

Sebastian forgot to notice the silence that had broken the conversation.

"So how did you break free from it?"

"Well, the church tries to tell you that god is this being of pure, unconditional love and his grace is the most wonderful thing in the universe, but if you spend five minutes breaking down any of the stories about him in the Bible, especially the Old Testament, you start to realize that he's just a whiny, self-righteous, insecure, love-bombing little cunt that will literally throw a temper tantrum and burn down your entire world and murder everyone around you if you don't love him exactly how he demands." Sebastian pointed to his parents writhing on their bed "And even when you have these two as guides to display that 'love' for you with remarkable fidelity on a daily basis, it's still a mindfuck and a half to deconstruct." Sebastian stopped his embalming to reflect, "That's why Levi was never able to escape. I really hadn't fully detoxed from it until I started therapy."

"Hmmm, maybe it's a good thing these two were such shitbags?"

Sebastian looked back at the open door that led to Levi's unmolested corpse and sighed, "No. I don't think so. I think I would've gladly swallowed the lie if they could have just offered us an ounce of the actual love they pretended to preach."

Aaron joined Sebastian's gaze before sinking his eyes. "Yeah, I get that." Aaron fought off every urge to reach out and hug the sorrow out of Sebastian in a brotherly embrace; but he knew that Sebastian could never accept anything like that from him

anymore. They finished preparing the back of the house and completed their loop to the kitchen as Aaron tried to digest Sebastian's damage.

"So, what about their afterlife makes you so fearful?" The oven's door clanked open and shut as they pulled it out.

"An eternity of anything sounds awful, doesn't it?" Sebastian reached over and detached the plastic yellow gas line from behind the appliance. He took in a deep, reassuring breath of the noxious fumes as he rose.

Aaron thought about it for a minute. "I don't know, I've never put much thought into it, but I guess I've always just kind of assumed it was this really green place with all of the people that I love there. Doesn't seem so bad." Aaron hesitated, "I've pictured you there before."

"Dude, think about it, *an eternity*. Sure, I could picture enjoying a few lifetimes in some type of lush paradise like you're describing, but wouldn't that eventually just get excruciatingly tedious and awful? Just doing the same shit over and over and over again. And then you just have to keep existing *for an eternity*. Imagine living for a trillion years; and then multiply it by a trillion more years; then do that a trillion more times, and then realize that you haven't even put a dent into your sentencing and there's no end in sight. I don't know about you, but suicide has been my exit strategy since I was like seven. And you expect me to just not give a shit when you take away my only escape route? The only thing that's comforted me this whole time?"

"Yeah, I guess eventually you'd get bored of it unless you were put on some sort of Groundhog Day loop."

"Yeah! That's the only way it could work! Cause it wouldn't matter which side you were on otherwise. Heaven or hell, both sides would just asymptotically approach a numbing zero with

each passing lifetime. But if you're doing a Ground Hog Day scenario, then what's the fucking point of any of it?"

Sebastian hefted another red fuel canister and handed it to Aaron. "Ok you take the pantry hallway over there. Just take it straight back and it'll lead you to the front door." He heaved out a heavy sigh as he picked up the final canister. "I'm going to make my way down this hallway and I'll meet you outside."

Sebastian could hear the roaches scurry about the darkness as he splashed his way down the hallway. He stopped at the first large fireplace and blindly felt around the mantle until he found the square key he was looking for and knelt down to find its hole. He scraped it along the wall until he felt it sink slightly into a depression and finessed it until he felt the corners of it line up and sink inwards. He turned the valve and heard the gas hiss out as he stuck his head into the kiln and took another deep breath.

He took out his phone and turned on the flashlight before creeping into the last room. The roaches scurried about the wood paneling of the den's walls until his light landed on what he was searching for.

Hanging on the wall to his left was a framed watercolor portrait of a man. The background had been vertically stroked with reds, yellows, blues, and pinks, deftly blended by a masterful hand; the man's face, or rather outline, was done with simple black lines that thickened and thinned according to the artist's desire – sometimes the lines came together congruently, and sometimes they fell short of each other, leaving space for the colors to bleed out and into the painting's world. Scribbled on the bottom in timid letters was the artist's name – Levi Dent – a self-portrait that had been completed before the drugs had completely unraveled him. Sebastian lifted it from its hook and tucked it under his shoulder before emptying the last drops of

his fuel into the room. He savored the sharp scent as the gasoline soaked deep into the carpet.

Aaron was waiting in the driveway next to his newly acquired Mercedes G-Class that they had found stashed away in the garage. Sebastian threw his empty canister in the back before making his way to the passenger door and tucking his treasure away in between the seat and center console.

"You want to do the honors?" Aaron expectantly held out his Zippo flip lighter.

"Obviously." Sebastian took the lighter and held it up for closer inspection. It had been worn smooth from years of faithful service in Aaron's kit, but Sebastian could still make out the inscription.

**Scout Snipers
Kill 1
Demoralize 1000**

Sebastian flicked it open and struck the flint with his thumb. He knelt down to light the fuse and stood as he watched the little trail of flames snaking its way into the house.

"So you believe that there's nothing on the other side? That it's just black?"

"No. I hope against hope that it's nothingness; not even black, just nothing." Sebastian expectantly waited for the blaze to catch the open gas lines and send the house up in an explosively brilliant spectacle, but it never came; just little trails of smoke that bellowed out of the available exhausts accompanied by the sounds of quietly growing furies.

Aaron pondered it for a moment. It wasn't an unreasonable belief, just impossible to conceptualize. Even the word 'nothing' did a disservice to describing the fate that Sebastian craved.

"So why haven't you pulled the trigger yet?"

Sebastian kept staring at the house, waiting for the big reveal.
“I’ve already tried a few times.”

“Really? I’ve never seen any scars and I usually look out for those.”

“Oh, no, I’ve never done cutting. Seems really messy and really risky. I’ve mostly just tried to poison myself and OD.” Sebastian pointed out to the gulf behind them, “Even tried to ride a rip tide out there and drown myself a few times.”

“None of them took?”

“I can’t explain it, dude. It’s like I’m not allowed to leave. Something is forcing me to stay here.”

“Why haven’t you tried to just eat a bullet?”

Sebastian turned his head to search for the knowing disbelief that was sure to come.

“Honestly? I’m afraid to. My past attempts would have killed anyone else. I’ve taken off my Kevlar and walked across intersections in firefights and the bullets all just lodged into cars and walls around me, but none of them would ever dare touch me. Every time that I’ve failed has just reinforced my fear that death is just an illusion and makes me more terrified to try the next time. I agree that a bullet would be the most definitive option, but I’m terrified that I’m just going to eat a bullet and somehow wake up on the other side of it. I’m terrified to find out that I truly am cursed to exist forever; so, I leave that one alone, just to take comfort in the hope.”

Aaron nodded in solemn understanding.

“Well, if you are cursed, then you can spend eternity with me. We’ll figure out how to make it bearable together.”

“Will Katrina be there with you?” Sebastian’s face was unwavering.

“Yeah, of course.”

“No thanks.” Dent’s face lit up as the roof finally caved and the fire leapt up to consume the fresh air. “Don’t worry, though. If there is another side, I’ll get to take solace in punishing those two and that little bitch that told them everything they were doing was ok.”

“Sebastian, why do you have to do that?”

Dent turned his empty face towards Aaron. “Because nobody else will do it for me. It’s ok Aaron.” Sebastian felt a twinge of gratitude for the gift his mother had imparted on him.

Aaron turned and began his skulk to the SUV. “Well, let’s get out of here. There still may be emergency services operating around here.”

“Give me a minute. I want to soak it in just a little longer.”

Sebastian stared up at the conflagration’s edges that licked at the assaulting storm, repelling its attacks into a steaming current. He strained his ears and listened for the furious curses. If he believed hard enough, he could convince himself that he could hear Chastity’s screams above the chaos.

“I hate you! I hate you! I haaaaate you!”

Sebastian closed his eyes and pictured the two bodies they had laid in the master bed, with the woman nestled gently in the crook of the man’s arm and her head resting on his shoulder. He felt a righteous indignation as he imagined her consciousness come to for one last bout of expiation, gnawing away at his nape like a rat in a submerged cage, desperately trying to chew her way out and escape the inevitability of her fate. He could hear her cursing the man, refusing to take her share of the blame for the Antenoran prison that they shared.

He whispered his axiom one last time before turning to get in his car.

“The suffering stopped with me.”

The house continued its burn, eventually turning to ashes that dispersed into the storm’s surge as quickly as they formed, while the little white hybrid and opulent SUV made their way out of the driveway. The pair drove to a harbor road that jutted out about a half mile into the gulf where Sebastian set fire to it before it made its way out to sea. Without looking back, he crawled into the passenger seat and fell into a deep slumber. His forty-eight hours were finally over.

I need to watch things die from a good, safe distance.

Vicariously, I live while the whole world dies.

You all feel the same so why can’t we just admit it?

Chapter 26

Just as dusk was setting in, Sebastian and Aaron pulled up to a gas pump at the Clines Corner truck stop just outside of Albuquerque. Waiting for them at the front of the store was one of Aaron's contacts who was there to assist at his request. Sebastian vaguely recognized him from pictures as one of Aaron's comrades from the Decimation War but had never actually met him.

Upon seeing the truck and Aaron's gawky hand-waving out the passenger window, the man leapt up from his seat on the vacant parking block and briskly paced towards the truck. Despite the somber occasion, the man couldn't conceal his sheepish grin, excited to see Aaron again. Sebastian had barely put the truck into park before Aaron was out of the truck and warmly embracing his friend.

"Hey Tony, this is my brother, Sebastian Dent."

Sebastian winced. The man, Tony Hapsford, reached his hand through the passenger window for a handshake.

"Hey Sebastian, it's a pleasure to meet you! Aaron here told me quite a few stories about you. Pretty fucking legendary stuff!"

Sebastian politely offered a half-smile and shook Tony's hand. The excited man withdrew from the window and turned his attention to Aaron. "So how much gas are you guys getting?"

"As much as we can? Sebastian, how much gas we need?"

"We got about a quarter tank left and we used four of the spare gas cans. So, we need about fifty gallons to fully top off."

"Ok that shouldn't be a problem. I'll see what I can do." Tony walked off to go exert his influence with his acquaintance at the cash register and get him to remove the ten-gallon limit on their pump."

Sebastian dismounted from the driver's seat and walked around the truck to confer with Aaron.

"Was Tony in our unit?"

"Nah, I met him during the war, after... I went to Ohio. He was an Army Ranger though and had a few deployments to Afghanistan."

"So, he was with you in Ohio?" Sebastian hated that four-letter word. He hated the way it felt in his mouth. He hated the sinking loss that it bred deep in his gut.

"Nah, he was still serving in the Army during the war. They had him out there guarding some military bases and he happened to know Stevens, so we helped each other out where we could, but he wasn't attached to the Decimated...if that's what you're wondering."

"Oh ok." Dent walked towards the edge of the parking lot and stretched his arms and entire body out towards the delightful New Mexican sunset painted in striking yellows, blues, and reddish pinks bouncing off of the warm, rusted sandstones.

"I'm going in the store to get some snacks. You want anything?"

"Yeah. Get me a couple of Red Bulls and some more ice for Postata."

Sebastian gave a thumbs-up as he continued his walk to the store entrance without turning around to acknowledge Aaron's request. The automatic doors had been left open to create a draft with the doors on the other side of the store leading out to the semi-truck diesel pumps. Tony was at the front cash register with his back to the door, too engrossed in his negotiations to notice Sebastian's entrance. Sebastian searched the poorly-stocked snack aisles while he eavesdropped on Tony.

"Come on man! I told you they were coming."

“Yeah, you said maybe twenty extra gallons, which I could have skimmed off of other transactions, but fifty gallons? Come on, man.”

“But they’re Decimated and they’re on a mission.” Sebastian could hear the desperation sneaking into Tony’s voice. Everyone that encountered Aaron seemed to instantly fall victim to a powerful compulsion to not let him down. It didn’t stem from Aaron’s extensive government training on body language and psychological manipulation either. It wasn’t fear that enticed others to do his bidding and it couldn’t be wholly attributed to respect either. It was something more. For lack of a better word, Sebastian understood it to be genuine love. It came from Aaron’s authenticity that he wore when he faced the world and his ability to instantly see what your needs were and validate them. The fact that this validation came from such an impressive specimen made it more addictive than the strongest narcotics, and Sebastian could recognize that, even after everything that had happened, he didn’t fully regret that he had fallen prey to Aaron’s charms.

“I don’t fucking care man. That’s too much gas to conceal and I’m going to lose my job over this; and in case you didn’t notice, there aren’t a lot of fucking jobs floating around here.”

“Would three centicoins help convince you to donate your personal monthly rations and get a ride to work for a little bit?” Sebastian’s voice snuck up behind Tony.

“Now, that’s an offer I can live with! You got it!” The cashier held out his phone to receive his encrypted bribe. Sebastian pulled out his digital wallet, entered the amount and tapped it to the cashier’s phone.

The cashier verified the payment and manipulated the cash register to ring out five separate transactions. As the methodical jingling and slamming of the automated till drawer

rang out, Sebastian addressed his new silent comrade and his shameful expression.

“Let’s keep this between us; Aaron doesn’t need to know.” Sebastian gave a knowing wink as he watched the relief take over Tony’s face. “Now go tell Aaron to fuel up and start grabbing ice. I still need to pay for these snacks.”

Tony gave Sebastian a grateful nod and hurried out the store entrance to deliver his good news to Aaron as Sebastian poured his armful of energy drinks, water gallons, and generic snacks onto the counter and pulled out his wallet to pay with his cash.

“That’ll do it for you?” The cashier happily waited on the generous stranger.

“Yeah that’s it. Throw ten bags of ice on there too.” Sebastian paused. “I’ll take one of these too.” Sebastian reached down under the counter and grabbed a Time magazine with an avant-garde portrait of a man with his Decimation stripe struck across the lead story’s title that caught his eye.

TIME

Who Are the Decimated?

Written by Ari Grayson

November 2024

On January 18, 2021, my net worth had dropped by over 60% overnight. On February 27, I panicked when we went under national lockdowns, and I took inventory of my meagerly stocked pantry. I had been meaning to make a resupply run to the store, but had kept putting it off for a later date when the initial hysteria would have worn off and I wouldn't have to embark on tedious quests scouring the city for the most basic of supplies. I believed that I had all the time in the world. This wasn't actually a real war like one of those third-world countries.

On April 20, I lost my brother and pregnant sister-in-law to a gruesome murder that had no apparent motivation or leads. On May 2, I sent my wife and two children to stay with friends upstate, in an area more insulated from the war. They never made it to their destination, and I still don't know what became of them, but I can only assume the worst happened on one of those unsanctioned toll roads.

I originally set out to write this article with no intention of defending the Decimated. Like most, I couldn't help but to focus my blame and resentment towards that homicidal group that I believed was the catalyst for our war and cause for all of the calamities that had befallen our country. The group so depraved, that as urban legend tells, they killed their own families for initiation.

When my editor gave me this assignment, I was taken aback. I told her that she must be mistaken and to find someone else, that there was no way that I could take this on without my bias. She assured me that there was no mistake and that I was her only choice for this article. Maybe she thought it would somehow be cathartic for me. Maybe she was just as bitter as I was at what they had taken from us and wanted me to skewer them end from end. Whatever her reason, I didn't fight very hard to be taken off of the assignment; I would take great pleasure dismantling them in my interviews, verbally breaking them down and unleashing all of my pent-up hatred towards them.

The only problem was, I didn't know a single Decimated. I asked around my office and some had heard rumors of a cousin-of-a-friend-of-a-friend, but there were no direct contacts. Think about it for yourself. Do you know of any Decimated? We've all seen them before. We know to look out for the signature scarlet lines struck across their necks and to cross the street when we see them, avoiding interaction at all costs. But how many of us know them? I widened my search to social media groups, therapy support groups for Decimated victims, going from bar-to-bar and asking the bartenders if they had any regular Decimated customers. Nobody had a solid lead for me to pursue. None of my inquiries turned up an anonymous phone call from a Decimated looking to be heard.

How could this be? The national government has published a list of the 122,112 Decimated members slotted for execution. How could such a large cohort, at the forefront of our social conscience, be so hard to track down? Did these men even really exist? Were they still operating for some unspoken government-sponsored purpose or are these marked men that walk amongst us just apparitions dreamt up by a fractured society telling ghost stories to avoid another brutal war?

The answer that I found didn't point to any subversive government conspiracies or sinister intentions, at least not in terms of how the Decimated relate to us. Rather, my answer pointed to something much more relatable, more humanizing, more heartbreaking than many of us realize. At the risk of alienating many of my audience before being given a chance to explain, I found myself understanding these men, feeling sympathy for them, and, dare I say it, a sense of gratitude that they've offered to stick around to guide us towards reunification.

I scrapped my original search strategy and started from scratch; no bias, only government-published facts about who the Decimated were, so that I could better understand where they came from and where they might have gone. After two more weeks, I was able to find three Decimated that were willing to talk to me, and where I found them and what they had to say subverted nearly everything that I'd held as truth. Before I go into these men's stories, I think it would be best if I shared what I learned about them during my research. All I ask is that my reader keeps an open mind, like I did, and let these ideas sink in deep before you judge these men's stories as lies made by men trying to hide their shame. You just may learn something new about them that our current discourse has failed to mention.

At their height, the Decimated were over 130,000 men that were organized under a CIA- and NSA-sponsored domestic terrorism response group under the codename Operation Decimation. Their objective was simple, remove the most violent elements of our society that were empowering the authoritarian right's militant takeover of the American government and society. Published government estimates attribute 45% up to 70% of the Decimation War's eighteen to twenty million dead to their violence. My fear and resentment of their brutality had been validated.

To end the war, a small contingency of 4,000 Decimated led by former U.S. Navy Seal Captain Jason Roberts, published what's now known as the Compromise; a deal offering their lives for immediate execution to pay for the Decimated's actions against America, and signed their names. Within two weeks, over 90% of the Decimated had come forward and added their names to the list. After a month of back-and-forth negotiations and revisions to the original compromise, the newly formed National Government overwhelmingly accepted the deal that would see to the execution of this group already marked for death by their tattoos. Those executions will commence in January 2025, with roughly one thousand executions scheduled for each month until February 2035, ten percent per year, thus adding a quite literal rendering to the name "the Decimated".

Most of us were probably already aware of most of these facts, or at least had a general understanding of the Compromise. But here are some facts most of us are probably unaware of. Of the roughly 130,000 men, less than a fifth of them had any affiliation with any government intelligence agencies before the outset of the war. The other 100,000+ that filled their ranks were conscripted from our OIF/OEF veteran population, with no prior knowledge of the sinister conspiracies working within our government. This conscription also heavily targeted veterans with combat-heavy experiences – Marines, Army Rangers, Navy Seals, snipers, paratroopers, combat engineers, special operations commandos. Of those conscripted veterans, 11% had previously or were currently experiencing homelessness and an additional 28% were facing "imminent homelessness". Roughly the same numbers are experiencing homelessness following the war. Over 70% of those veterans had also been diagnosed with one or more mental illness attributed to their wars. Diagnoses of substance-use-disorder among the Decimated have tripled when compared to their pre-war veteran status.

Here's one that may be even more surprising, over 70% of the Decimated have a college undergraduate degree.

Did you also know that the Decimated did not choose their targets? That's right, it wasn't randomized hyperviolence arbitrarily enforced by uncontrollable men enslaved to their bloodlust, as many of us wrongfully believe. At the onset of the war, the federal intelligence echelons that had formed Operation Decimation had curated a list of over twelve million American targets for "deletion" by those under their charge. Did you also know that as they approached their original target of twelve million, the CIA had identified an additional eight million for deletion? Did you know that was what sparked the Compromise? These men saw that there would be no end to the death spiral that fed their country's insatiable desire for retribution, and that's when they offered themselves as a sacrifice to arrest the bloodletting.

You may say to yourself, these were marked men, condemned to death no matter what. Whether by war or by execution, they would've met their demise. Well, to that I say, after how long? After how many more American deaths? Did you know, that of the roughly 130,000 of their group, less than 8,000 have died? And that of those 8,000 dead, over 5,600 have come from suicide since the war? Love them or hate them, you have to admit that those are some insane resiliency rates.

Armed with my newly discovered knowledge, I began to search where I thought I would find them. I attended Alcoholics and Narcotics Anonymous meetings, loitered around hospitals and rehabilitation programs, volunteered at soup kitchens and homeless shelters. Not a single red stripe at any of these places. Exasperated, I set out walking up and down the tent cities that have overtaken San Diego's downtown. Starting at Sixteenth St. and National Ave., I began marching up and down the streets in a concentric pattern. I walked for over six hours and there was no end to the homeless misery. I stopped a few

times to call out to the tented residents, which would usually be received by a suspicious face poking out from behind a meshed window or a detached voice asking what I wanted. Without any food or money to offer, most just told me to “fuck off”. At the mention of the Decimated, I’d usually receive an answer of angry grumbling and aggressive shuffling that would send me scurrying off.

At one particularly conspicuous tent, I asked my usual questions and received no response, until I heard a twig snap behind me. I turned around and saw a giant man of seemingly Samoan descent bearing down on me with hatred in his eyes. I shrank back in fear and tripped off of the curb behind me, sending me whirling to the street.

The street gravel imbedded into my palms, but I scrambled up and sprinted away. In the pursuit of saving myself, I lost my bearing and found myself in a secluded alley tucked away under the I-5 overpass. The alley was empty except for a pair struggling at the end of the street. I heard a woman’s voice scream for help and resumed my sprinting.

“Stop!” I yelled. What I was going to do to help I didn’t know, but the adrenaline was still coursing through my veins, enabling my savior complex. I approached the pair and waved out my hands, screaming for them to stop, but couldn’t figure out how to interject myself. With one forceful wave, the man had brushed me off and back into the dirt.

“Gimme the dope!” The man snarled at the woman as he repositioned his elbow back into her neck.

After recovering from the initial shock of my helplessness, I began to regather my strength for a second attempt at breaking up the struggle, but while weakly lifting myself from the ground, a blur of a shadow moved in and delivered a rib-shattering kick into the man’s side.

A deep, forceful voice accompanied the kick, "What'd I tell you about picking on girls in my quarter, Rob?!" A mountainous black man stood above the keeled over assailant grasping for air. "The next time I'm breaking your arms and lettin' the quarter have their way with you!"

The girl ran off as the man began crawling away from the threat. "You right. You right. I'm sorry Mr. Stone. The cravings got a hold of me."

The real savior let down a hand and effortlessly pulled me up from my pathetic pile. "What's a soft-skinned guy like you doing down here in the quarter? There isn't anything down here for you."

As I looked up, I found what I'd been searching for, the red stripe struck across his neck, darkened to a deep burgundy against his Congolese complexion. "I'm looking for you." The lethality of his marking struck fear into my heart as I felt my spirit leaving my body to watch as I stupidly answered his question.

"Well, I don't know you. What are you looking for me for?" The man spoke as if speaking to a child.

"I'm writing an article on the Decimated, but I can't find anyone to interview."

"Oh, so you're one of those masochist types huh? Here to tell me how evil I am?"

"I...I don't know." I muttered my response.

"What do you mean you don't know? You got to witness our violence firsthand, go and brag about it to your little friends in your comfortable little houses. That's what you wanted, right?"

"I don't know."

“You’re about to start pissing me off. Tell me what you’re after.” Mr. Stone’s face was unwavering, and his eyes watched, unwavering, while he decided what to do with me.

“I don’t know!” I’d been so preoccupied with finding a Decimated that I had completely forgotten to prepare for an interview. “I don’t know what to think of the Decimated. I thought I hated you, but I just don’t know anymore! I just want to listen to what you have to say and try and make sense of all of this!”

Mr. Stone’s face softened at my honest answer and pulled out a phone to make a call. “Hey Sean, it’s Antonio, I got a man down here in the quarter that wants to talk to you. Better bring Doc down here too, got another guy that caught my fists, and he probably needs to get checked out.” Just like that the conversation was over and Mr. Stone was back to talking to me. “I’m Antonio, Antonio Stone. I called up my friend Sean to come talk to you since he’s much more open-minded and eloquent than I am. Word of warning though, if we sense any sort of ill-intention from you, you’re going to leave here with less than you came with.”

I mulled over Antonio’s warning, more a declaration than a threat, while we waited. Within fifteen minutes, his friends, Doc and Sean, had arrived. We made our introductions, and they immediately made their way to the end of the block where Doc began his medical checkup of the wheezing drug addict that showed genuine remorse for his actions and gratitude for being spared Mr. Stone’s street justice.

Standing on the peripheral of the striped trio as Doc administered care and the other two joked in the background was surreal. Seeing their haunting tattoos up close while my body detoxed from the adrenaline brought on an unsettling feeling that I was flirting with death, loitering around a pride of lions that weren’t hungry enough to notice me, yet.

Once satisfied that the man would recover, we piled up into Sean's 90's-style Toyota 4Runner and took a short drive to a quiet park that sat along Mission Bay. Along the way, I learned that Sean and Antonio were former enlisted Force Reconnaissance Marines, who had operated with "Doc", a former USAF pararescueman, during their various OEF deployments. They freely gave details about their former service, but none of them breached the subject of the Decimation War, despite the subject weighing heavily on all of our minds. Sean was a handsome, All-American type who worked as a general contractor and spent about half his working hours volunteering his services to community-rebuilding projects. His free time was usually occupied helping out his sister with her three kids. "Doc" (I never got his actual name) spoke with a mild Spanish accent and had received his nickname from his military specialty as a special operations medic. He maintained his military nickname by volunteering as an EMT and as a nurse at one of the nearby clinics. I later learned in the interview that his medical inclination also led him to take on an almost sacred role of drug-administrator and healer for the Decimated within his network.

We parked and Antonio immediately got out to greet some homeless people congregating near the public restroom while the rest of us made our way to an empty bench shaded by a large pepper tree. After an awkward pause I began the interview, wary of Antonio's warning, unsure where to start.

"So...you guys operated together as Decimated?"

Sean sighed as if to tell me I was only partially getting it. "Yeah, we were Decimated together, but we didn't exactly operate together. We tried to seek each other out just to get some sort of reaffirming brotherhood, but the orders that came from up top generally dictated our targets and teams and areas of operation; they tolerated us banding together into small pockets, as long as it helped improve mission effectiveness."

"But you guys were able to remain close and have stuck together since. I mean, you all live together, right?"

Sean and Doc both gave a half-hearted chuckle. "We live together, but Antonio over there's on his own."

"Oh, he prefers to live in his own place? Must get pretty lonely."

"Nah, Stone's homeless."

"He doesn't live with you?"

"Nah, he doesn't live with us." Doc must've seen the perplexion in my face and didn't force me to stumble through my thoughts. "He's there by choice. After the war, most of us had picked up enough spoils to never be homeless again, but Antonio was one of the ones that decided to donate all of it to rebuilding. We tried to give him money to rent out his own place when we first discovered his situation, but he just turned around and used that to house another homeless family. So, we just keep a room open for him, but he'd rather be out here." Doc pointed generally around us. "It seems to make him happy, and we get to see him a few times a week when he comes by to train with us and get a hot meal."

"But why would someone choose to be homeless? From what I saw this morning, it was all so bleak."

"I think that's the point." Doc graciously explained further, "Something I learned in my therapist training is the notion that you gotta assume that everyone is doing their best. Antonio's choice to be homeless may seem nonsensical to someone like you on the outside, and even to guys like me and Sean that he lets in, but if you start with the assumption that his choices are motivated by a place of logic and self-preservation, then it starts making a whole lot more sense."

"And what do you think that motivation is for him?"

“This is just a working theory, but we think he’s got a lot of moral injury.”

“Moral injury?”

“Yeah, it’s the psychological and spiritual fallout that occurs when someone acts against their personal moral code and values.”

Sean took over, “So take Antonio for example. He actually was a first generation American and I think he got super disillusioned by the idealized belief in a pure and good America that his parents clung to when it was in direct contradiction to his experiences as a BIPOC in America. I only witnessed some of his struggle in the Marines, but it’s amazing how much racism was tolerated in the military under the guise of brotherly camaraderie. Follow those formative experiences up with the racial tensions leading up to the Decimation War and what he was tasked with, and it’s easy to see how moral injury could have occurred.”

“I still don’t understand. What was he tasked to do?”

“Well, we aren’t one-hundred-percent sure. ‘Tonio was sent on separate missions a lot because of his unique connection to his immigrant community (I later learned that Decimated were often deployed to their childhood communities as a way of blending in), so we weren’t there for a lot of his pain, but we do know that he’ll be one of the ones shedding blood tears on his Decimation Day. Just speculation here, but we think he was forced to target undereducated immigrants caught up in the propaganda. So, the moral injury could have stemmed from having to kill oppressed members within his own community. When you take that into account, it makes a lot of sense that he’d want to spend his remaining years trying to protect and help America’s most oppressed people. In his mind, he’s probably got a lot of wrongs to right before he leaves.”

“But that’s just our working theory.” Doc spit out the clarification as Antonio walked up and rejoined us.

“Hey Toni, he wants to know why you’re homeless.” The three laughed at the running inside joke.

“So, I can keep my knife hand sharp in case the soft-skins want to get uppity again!”

I chuckled, not sure at what that meant, though. “No, Sean and Doc were just explaining moral injury to me.”

Antonio’s face hardened into a dignified expression. “Yeah, Doc’s probably right. I probably got some of that. But if I got it, then they got it too.”

“Is that so? Do you guys think you have some of that?”

“Oh yeah of course! I think pretty much all of our group has some form of that. That’s why you can reliably find us on volunteering projects or out here fending for the homeless. For the ones that don’t, well those are probably just psychopaths, or they’ve completely detached from the world, but we’ll still take care of them because nobody else will.”

“I actually had a really hard time tracking one of you down. I couldn’t find any of you at the AA meetings or soup kitchens.”

Sean chuckled. “Yeah, you were probably looking in wrong places and that brings up another point about the Decimated. We’re already marked for death, so you won’t find any of us accepting those resources; not when they can be used to help another American rebuild into a semblance of a decent life. As for those twelve-step groups, we tend to avoid them because our markings tend to trigger a lot the other addicts, so we run our own version of drug support. Doc you wanna?”

Doc took over. “Yeah, so I volunteer for a variety of services for Decimated. I offer addiction therapy and run one of those

support-style groups, but not many of the guys are really interested in that.”

“Why’s that? I saw online that substance-use disorder was up over thirty percent in your group.”

The three of them laughed. “That’s a pretty modest estimate. Think about it, would you care about your recovery if you had a set execution date? No future to build towards? If you had another few years left to live, outcast from society, and no one to spend them with?”

“Yeah, well when you put it that way...so what do you do instead?”

“I help them get fucked up.”

“What?”

“Yeah, we got a distillery and an aquaponics system to grow weed and magic mushrooms set up in the garage. We deliver or hand out products as needed to our Decimated network free of charge. That trifecta of intoxicants covers a majority of our customers. A good portion of the guys like the harder stuff though. So, I “acquire” pills and other narcotics from the clinic I volunteer at – opiates, ketamine, Adderall, y’know, mainstream stuff.”

“Isn’t that illegal? Why are you telling me this?”

“What are they going to do? Execute me?” Doc laughed, “Besides, the clinic gets way more free labor out of me than I take, so we have an unspoken agreement where they turn a blind eye to missing gear. So yeah, I try to administer doses in a responsible manner that helps our guys get to sleep or make it through one more day. We also have an open-door policy at the house so anyone that wants to have a session can stick around and not be alone with their thoughts. I think that sense of connection is the most powerful tool that we have, and it

seems to really draw in the guys. We usually have 4-5 guys at the house at any one time.”

“You laugh, but I can sense a sort of liberation in this desperation, like this hopeless bottom has a lack of consequences and you have nowhere to go but up.”

“Yeah, if we can liberate our brothers from their suffering, even just a little bit, then we can feel good about our day.”

“You know, I’ve spent so long resenting you guys for your violence, I never took the time to think about the suffering that you guys endure.”

Sean took over, “Yeah, we didn’t withhold our savagery, but that doesn’t mean that we enjoyed it or that we don’t feel the pain of what we did every day. I myself have recurring nightmares of faces that I’ve taken sitting in a courtroom and sentencing me for my actions. Most of us are looking forward to the relief that will come from our Decimations.”

“So, you’re saying that you don’t want to be here?”

“Would you want to? Knowing the things that we’ve done?”

“So, are you saying your actions were wrong?”

“Wrong? No. Regrettable? Yes.”

“But what choice did we have?” Antonio chimed in, “If we did nothing, then we would’ve literally been living under an authoritarian dictatorship. That’s not the country we were led to believe in when we volunteered for the military and later as Decimated. We didn’t ask for this war. All we wanted was to preserve America’s promise for the next generation.”

“Do you believe that you were successful to that end?”

“Only time will tell. But look around us. We’re not blind to the fact that our country is still falling apart. We mourn her losses every day, but if we can reunify, drop the divisive, racist

undertones that have plagued us since America's inception, then we can rebuild into something that was worth what we did. That's the only reason why we've volunteered to stick around until our Decimations. That's why we spend so much of our time trying to help rebuild."

"So, a reunified America is an equitable deal for the war's burdens?"

"I think an equitable deal would be if we protected the next generation from war. That our violence was so grotesque, so repulsive, that the next generation would shutter at the thought of another war. That would make me smile with satisfaction on my Decimation Day."

"Doc, Sean, you have anything to add to that?"

"No, I think Antonio hit the nail on the head. A reunified America without violence is the dream."

"And what if the dream fails? What if our tensions do boil over again?"

Doc sucked in a deep breath, "Well I'll tell you one thing. Most of the guys I medicate are trying to dampen and forget their violence. But if this country decides that it wasn't enough and decides it wants another war, it better do it after we're gone. Because every last Decimated that I know would switch to methamphetamines and burn this entire world to the ground within a month."

The other two gave affirming nods. We sat there for a few minutes as the thoughts began to weigh heavily on everyone's minds. I searched for more rounds of pertinent questions but couldn't without violating the somber atmosphere. Instead, we switched the conversation to more pleasant things, the positive developments that they see happening within our society, the incremental but meaningful good that their volunteer projects are doing for our communities, funny stories from before the

war, their favorite recipes for spam and other canned goods. We talked about anything pleasant, mostly small joys and victories for another half hour before they loaded me back up in Sean's 4Runner and dropped me back off at my car. Before they let me go, they invited me to stop by their volunteer projects anytime, or to call them up for any follow-up questions, but Sean also reiterated Antonio's grave warning.

"You know, we're all for free speech, so we want you to be as truthful as your journalistic integrity compels you to, but we'll be reading your article. And if we find that you twisted our words, or that this was just a ruse for you to write a propaganda hit piece on our kind, we do know how to get back in touch with you."

I thanked them for the interview and told them that I would be as fair as possible, and that their insight had challenged a lot of my former truths, but it would take time for me to come around to fully forgiving them.

"That's fair enough." With that, they waved and were off.

Well, I've had a lot to mull over. I revisited the articles and hearings that surrounded the start of our Decimation War, and I've gotta say, I think that I have to agree with Sean. Their actions were regrettable, but not wrong. I find that they were more regrettable in regard to these men, that we weren't faithful enough to our country's values and forced these men to shoulder the burden of our course correction.

As for that urban legend that they killed their own families? Well, there are some seeds of truth in that. An undisclosed number were given the impossible task of eliminating one or more family members in the name of their country. Those will be the ones granted the final rights of wearing scarlet mascara at their Decimations in remembrance of the family blood spilt at their own hands. I hope that you can see those tears as authentic and weep with them when they come. I also hope

that we're able to smile with these men on their Decimation Days.

Chapter 28

“So, this is the body?” Tony asked, nodding at the shoddy box leaking contaminated water in the truck bed.

“Yeah, that’s our guy, Postata.”

Sebastian hopped up in the back of the truck to begin packing in the fresh ice around his friend’s corpse. He unlatched the lid and thrust it open, pulling in large, sickly wafts of the chemically sanitized smell of Alex’s hastily embalmed body that forced a choked gag when it hit his nostrils. Sebastian instinctually stood up to remove himself from the assaulting vapors and looked down onto the rotting corpse of his friend. The body was blue and slightly bloated. They had wedged the body into the box on its side, with knees bent because Alex hadn’t even been able to get the dimensions right for his own coffin. Alex’s former face peered back at Dent with a grossly distorted expression; the eyes had been crudely stitched up and remained closed; the mouth remained slightly ajar with an unrestrained tongue poking out; the ice that the head had been propped up on had melted, leaving it to rest at an unnatural angle; everything had a pale gray undertone to it. *This isn’t Alex*, Sebastian thought, *this is just some decomposing meat. Why are we doing any of this?*

“Man that stinks! Brings back some memories, huh?”

“Haha yeah it does!” Tony eagerly replied to Aaron’s rhetorical question.

“Yeah, they’re great memories” Sebastian spitefully rasped under his breath as he returned to filling the ice box. The smile quickly left Tony’s face.

Sebastian packed the last bags of ice and slammed the casket door shut. He had to sit on top of the lid so that the latch would lock on the overstuffed box before hopping down out of the bed while Aaron began to stow away the full gas canisters.

“Ok so what’s the plan for you guys now?”

“Well, we gotta get this guy to Pendleton and in the ground before he decomposes too much on us. We’re probably just going to keep heading west on I-40 until we hit Flagstaff...”

“Ooooh I wouldn’t do that if I were you, especially at night. That’s Native country. The reservations are dangerous for lone travelers, especially ones with out-of-state tags.”

Tony was right. The large swath of land in northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona dedicated to Native American reservations was no place for outsiders. Before the war, this had been one of the largest remaining parcels of land allotted to the indigenous populations. So much of it had remained intact for two reasons. Firstly, it was mostly desert highland and had very little water resources or arable soil remaining after the first American cattle barons had swept through the land and destroyed the ecologies that would have rooted rainfall into the ground and enable it to support sustainable food systems, instead leaving behind the barren landscapes that we know today, quickly swept and altered by unobstructed flash floods. Secondly, it wasn’t known to harbor many valuable mineral resources. Although it’s not unreasonable to speculate that the reservation would have been much smaller if the San Juan oil basin had been discovered and developed prior to the 1940’s and 1950’s; before the federal government actually started to develop some sort of semblance of shame about blatantly stealing more land from these swindled people. So, nations like the Navajo and Hopi were allowed to keep this little scrap of land that could barely sustain their people with the little mineral wealth that was left intact. Despite all of this, the citizens of these territories remained faithful stewards of sacred lands that were meant to sustain any people journeying through, as we were all just transient guests of the paradise anglicized as ‘North America’.

But this imbalanced offering wasn't enough to protect their future. Generations of Natives had long known that their people and culture would never be truly accepted to participate in the American democracy and that these reservations were just a means to keep them separated from the rest of the population. Instead of being allowed to control their own future through the land's wealth, as was their birthright, they had been forced to become reliant on federal subsidies and gambling revenues. They were trapped in a game that they could not win and their survival depended on the graciousness of the cheaters that kept altering the rules whenever it suited their needs.

When the war broke out, these already forgotten people were abandoned even further. Supply chains had been broken, leaving shortages around the country in every sector. Naturally, all remaining trade and supply consolidated around industrial and commercial corridors that were concentrated along the coasts and navigable rivers. These contracted markets further isolated the American citizens cast into this western limbo, forcing them to mostly subsist off of the scarce resources provided to them by this broken land.

Their isolation from the rest of the country was bluntly displayed for them after the war. The federal subsidies that they had been forced to rely on dried up almost overnight, with the funds being redirected to more pressing matters, like funding more military and domestic policing policies that were "maintaining law and order" in America's more valuable economic markets and ports.

Their gambling revenues simultaneously dried up overnight. When the dollar crashed and lost over 60% of its value within the first week of the war, gambling revenues were directly impacted. Not that destitution served as a deterrent against gambling. On the contrary, desperation is often the source of many gambling freefalls and the number of diagnosable

gambling addictions proliferated across the country. More than the lack of disposable incomes, it was the lack of viable prizes offered by the casinos that made the businesses dry up. The prizes for tens or even hundreds of thousands of dollars no longer held their same allure because they couldn't inspire the hope of escaping the economic spiral that everyone was in. They could barely buy you a few frugal years in another country; that is, if you could find another country willing to accept American immigrants.

Instead, most American gamblers preferred to bet on the next iteration of cryptocurrency. Those that bet on established cryptos like Bitcoin and Ethereum were rewarded with enough sustained growth to recover what they had lost in the dollar crash. Unfortunately, most decided to bet on emerging cryptocurrencies that promised an opportunity to 'strike it rich'. Sadly, most of these were little more than pump-and-dump grifts propped up by the anticipation of being the next pop culture sensation that had the potential for 10,000% value increase by growing from \$0.00001 to \$0.10, causing even more American wealth to drain into the coffers of anonymous internet promoters profiteering off of American panic and suffering.

When their two main revenue sources evaporated, so too did everything else for the reservations. External consumer products, medical aid, agricultural machinery and fertilizer quickly disappeared. Even water from the San Juan River began to dry up since their Colorado neighbors had no federal enforcers to incentivize honoring their previous water-use agreements. The only leverage that the reservations had was their oil and natural gas stocks that were supplying these local markets; but even that threat had been mostly neutralized by the fact that their neighbors were the only customers available to buy their meager energy resources, and antagonizing them would mean destroying the market for one of their only

surviving revenue streams. Instead, they 'chose' to resecure their water source for a scandalously low price for their hydrocarbons in the local energy markets. So, once again, the indigenous peoples were forced to trade the last bit of their mineral wealth in exchange for what had already been promised to them - survival.

Their isolation was somewhat of a blessing, though, in a very distorted sense of the word. Whereas their ancestral cousins on reservations in eastward states like Oklahoma had economies that remained intertwined with neighboring cities and states, these people were truly free from any ties to the country that encapsulated them. When they were abandoned, all of the anchors that had kept them in place were uprooted and taken elsewhere. With nothing else to lose, they were free to rise from their bondage and use the ties that had previously held them down to choke the country that had taken everything from them. They began to force extortionary taxes on any company that wanted a direct route to ship Chinese goods from southern California ports to America's Rocky interior. With this new-found power, they expanded their influence and decided to expand their borders to what they deemed was fair. This expansion connected the Hopi and Navajo nations of the Four Corners area to the Yavapai reservation northeast of Phoenix and northwards to reservations in central Utah. They used this choking influence to revisit their neighbors in southern Colorado to renegotiate the extortionary terms of their energy contracts and reestablish their preexisting rights to the waters of the Animas and San Juan Rivers.

All of this occurred during the short eighteen months of civil war. By the time the war was over, they had more than doubled the size of their reservations' territorial claims and weren't going to concede any of this new land or power back to the federal government without a full-scale genocide. By this time, most major western metropolitan centers had

experienced significant population contractions upwards of 40%; in the extreme case of Arizona, both Phoenix and Tucson had both shrank to less than 20% of their pre-war sizes. Because of this diminished importance of western lands, the U.S. government decided that it wasn't worth dedicating the resources to taking back worthless land that had been further devalued by the war. The diplomatic capital that they'd have to sacrifice in the international community to launch an aggressive military campaign against their most exploited minority alone made this choice non-viable. On top of that, there was no way to confidently predict how the Decimated would react. So, to save face, the federal government capitulated on their land demands under the condition that shipping route taxes would be negotiated with the federal government and at a heavily discounted rate from their peak during the war.

This arrangement did have one massive benefit that the federal intelligence analysts couldn't have predicted. To the south, Mexican drug cartels had expanded their smuggling operations on U.S. soil and had begun overtly operating along corridors in southern Arizona and New Mexico and along certain parts of west Texas. Again, the federal government wasn't going to allocate law-enforcement resources to police this heavily devalued area with a massive ongoing emigration crisis, leaving a vacuum that allowed drug cartels to operate unmolested from Yuma to Phoenix to Hatch to El Paso. The only thing that stood in the way of further cartel expansion were the expanded reservation borders to the north that provided a clear boundary of where these operations ended. It should be a testament to the Native resolve that even the savagery of the Mexican drug cartels was halted by the ends these Nations were willing to go to in order to preserve their people and their land. Even members of the Decimated had to stop and give a reverent "God damn" under their breath whenever they came across stories about these actions. So, cartel expansion along much of this southern corridor was halted, although drugs were allowed

to pass through to American markets, with a tax of course, as long as none of the inventory made it into their communities.

While shipping companies and drug cartels were allowed passage under pre-negotiated tariffs, regular Americans weren't so welcome. During daylight hours, one could usually make it through fairly safely with maybe a steep fine paid on the spot to tribal police that had pulled you over for out-of-state-tags. Although, it was a good idea to be fully stocked on gas and water before driving through because stopping at any of the towns or rest stops could lead to confrontation and serious trouble, especially if you had distinctly European features. At nighttime, unfamiliar vehicles with out-of-state plates were likely to be run off the road and left for dead in the ditch; either by tribal police or just a concerned member acting in the tribe's best interests.

Tony was absolutely correct in warning Sebastian and Aaron to steer clear of I-40 tonight. Sebastian was already aware of the material threat, but thought it was best to have a local warn Aaron who tended to disregard anything as a threat.

"I'd say your best bet is to head south now on I-25 until you hit I-10 and then just take that westward."

"Yeah, but that's all cartel country and we're just as big of a target down there with all of this gear hanging out the back. So why wouldn't we take the most direct course considering we got a rotting corpse here."

"Aaron, he's right. We're not crossing the reservation tonight. It'll be a lot less risky to head south like Tony said." Sebastian opened the rear door of the truck's extended cab and began rummaging around his rucksack. He pulled out a roll of electrical tape colored bright red and circled around to the back of the truck to wrap a horizontal line across the open tail gate.

A slight frown turned on Aaron's face. "What's that?"

“A mitigation measure.”

“So it’s true? Decimated are working with the cartel?!”

“No. But there’s an understanding.” Dent didn’t bother looking up from his task.

“Yeah, Aaron, things aren’t black and white out here.”

Aaron remained unconvinced, but he quickly dropped his furrowed brow for a smile as he launched into his goodbye. “I see. Well, Hapsford, I’m sorry to just cut and run like this, but, you know, dead body and all.” Aaron spread out his arms in his signature exaggerated hug gesture and wrapped his friend up in a powerfully intoxicating embrace.

“Hey yeah, I understand, brother. It was good to see you and I’m glad you called so that I could help out. Let me know if y’all run into any trouble or if you need anything else from me.”

“Yessir, we will. I’ll send you a sit-rep when we make it to California.”

Sebastian made the last pass on the six-inch-thick red stripe across the tailgate and slammed it shut. He walked over to Aaron’s contact. “Hey Tony, thanks for the assistance. It was nice to meet you.” Sebastian held out his hand for Tony to shake.

“Hey brother, it was great meeting you too. You take care of this guy!” Tony took Sebastian’s hand and pulled him in for a half-hug. Dent shrank from the familial familiarity. It was all just so disingenuous and cheap to him. He hated uninvited physical contact from strangers, but that was an annoyance he had learned to tolerate whenever Aaron’s proximity would cause everyone around to become unnecessarily loose with their affections.

“Yeah I will.” Dent gave a polite half-chuckle before quickly detaching himself from the hug. “Aaron, can you take over driving? I need some sleep.”

“Yeah, you got it.” Aaron held out his hand and caught the keys tossed his way. They got in the truck, waved their final goodbyes and drove off to intercept I-25 south.

Chapter 29

You should know by now, really.

That this could end, really.

You should know I could never really make it work.

Wake up. Let's pretend.

Sebastian's eyes slowly opened to a calm but overcast sky and the familiar twinge of bitter disappointment of having woken up again. He felt down beside him and pushed the seat's recliner button forward. The electronic motor gave a soft whirr as the seat creaked upwards with him.

"Oh good, you're up. Welcome back to the land of the living. How you feel?" Aaron put his phone down.

"Hungover as shit. How long was I out for?"

"Over sixty hours, dude. That's how I always felt after sleeping off my longer stalks."

Sebastian rubbed his eyes as he tried to work through his brain fog. "Where are we?"

"Vicksburg. The storm made landfall and just stalled; dumped all of its rain right on top of us and flooded all of the roads around us. I just pulled over here and hunkered down."

Sebastian continued to gather his bearings. They were in an empty parking lot of a state welcome center with a building directly ahead with bulbous white pillars that wrapped around it, fashioned after the porches of the southern plantation style homes, and flanked by ancient magnolias. Off to the side, there was a metallic blue sign that read 'Welcome to Mississippi' with s's that gracefully arched in exaggerated interlocking curves. Underneath was the state motto, 'The Hospitality State'. Sebastian scoffed at the rancid hypocrisy.

"We got anything to eat or drink?"

“We got Gatorade, water, and some animal crackers. Not much besides that; everything’s still closed. There’s a vending machine around the back though if you got any change.”

Sebastian opened the door and mindlessly stumbled out of the car. The air was heavy with the storm’s lingering musk. Sebastian reached for the sky and lazily bent in a tottering arch while a patch of sweat stuck his shirt to his back. He reached downwards and readjusted his gear before giving his taint a vigorous scratching.

Around back, he found the vending machines but was quickly disappointed when he discovered that there was no power to the building. He walked around further to find the bathrooms only to quickly discover they were locked from the inside. He emptily nodded his head in agreement at his fulfilled expectations before listlessly wandering out towards the west lawn and over the crest of a levy embanking the swollen Mississippi River dutifully cleaning up after the storm and carrying its flotsam out to sea to be unceremoniously buried in the abyssal plain. The water tirelessly churned up more sediments that discolored it to a deep reddish-brown that enriched the lively greens of the banks’ lush grasses. Sebastian made it about twenty paces down the incline before the grass gave out underneath his feet, leaving behind two streaking divots. Sebastian let out a ‘hmmph’ but didn’t protest any further. He stood up, unzipped his pants and began to relieve himself.

There was an animated commotion across the river that seemed to run counter to the river’s currents. Sebastian squinted his eyes as he peered outwards and tried to discern the commotion. It appeared to be an alligator, at least fourteen feet long, straining against the river’s currents as it struggled to keep a scavenged meal held within its clutches. The carrion appeared to be another alligator that was about half his size, but it was impossible to tell under the thick blanket of vapors. It

was difficult for Sebastian to convince himself that it was even an alligator at all. For all he knew, it could have been some other primordial creature thrashing about down there, resenting the storm's intrusive reveille.

He bounced his feet and gave an exaggerated shake with his hands before zipping up and turning to walk back to the car, but couldn't send the signals to his legs. Dazed, he stood there admiring the storm surge's essential chaos for another twenty minutes.

Eventually, Sebastian mustered the capabilities to fully turn around and find his companion. Perched on a bench atop the hill's crest was Aaron in a silent overwatch. He shot a hand up over his head and spun it around in counterclockwise circles when Sebastian spotted him. A suppressed smile crept out as Sebastian made his way up to the rally point to discuss their next orders.

"So, what are our next steps?" Sebastian remained standing a couple of feet lower than the bench so that he could allow his muscles to continue slowly decompressing while still maintaining eye-level with Aaron sitting on the bench.

"Everything still appears to be closed and the emergency broadcasts are still warning everyone to stay inside. Looks like the flooding has subsided, so we can probably make it out of here now."

"How are you on gas? Even if the roads aren't washed out, there's always a shit ton of branches and downed power lines afterwards. And that Mercedes was built to stroke egos, not offroad. We're probably going to have to take quite a few detours while we're getting out of here, so if you didn't fill up, then it might be a better move to stay put for another couple of days while the emergency crews clear the roads."

"Got a full tank and twenty extra gallons in the back. I also 'acquired' a chainsaw and some other supplies while you were out. I say we get to our next target as soon as possible so that we can keep taking advantage of the storm's cover."

"Ok that works for me. Where's our next target?"

"Shreveport."

Sebastian took a measured breath. "You mean Ruth?"

"Yeah."

*Do you like the way the water tastes?
Like on fire?
Then come forth cause it's coming round.
Be aware! The water!
Be aware! The water!*

Sebastian's eyes traced along the labyrinth of steel girders supporting the cantilever bridge spanning the foreboding river separating them from their next target as he contemplated the coming repercussions and possible alternatives.

"We should take them off the list."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Yeah, they aren't a real threat anymore."

"What about all of that shit you were saying to your mom? I thought you hated your sister."

"Oh yeah, I absolutely can't stand my sister, don't get me wrong, but not enough to falsely condemn her. I was just saying all of that stuff to Chastity because you didn't really leave me a lot of room for her punishments, so I had to get creative before I sent her."

"But you saw her score. She's an 8.2."

“Yeah, but most of that was just our dad’s doing; she was just mirroring him for approval. She’ll come to her senses now that he’s not around to influence her anymore. “

“That doesn’t matter, Sebastian. She made her choices and got herself that score. I realize that a part of you must still care about your family, but there must be consequences for those that set this war on us. We can’t start picking and choosing our targets now because we’ll end up talking our way out of all of them.”

Sebastian stared out at the mists dispersing and reforming over the river. “Honestly, she’s not my family. My nephews are complete strangers to me. I stopped coming around years ago, so I’ve never met them in person; only ever talked to them over the phone. And I think it would be quite fitting to have my parents’ genetics wiped from the earth.”

“So what’s the problem then?”

“It’s her husband. He’s a good guy, and he doesn’t deserve that. He can bring her back.”

“Yeah, I read up on him while you were out. Joseph Taylor, state senator from the Louisiana legislature. One of the only republicans in the state to denounce the election fraud and stand up against the coup. Seems like a decent enough guy, but it’s not likely he’s as innocent as you think if he’s able to stay married to someone so radicalized.”

Sebastian sighed and hung his head low. The over-encumbered clouds began to scatter more cleansing drops across the landscape. “But he is that innocent, and he still believes in our country just as much as you or I do.”

“But how can you be so sure?”

“He was my best friend growing up. He and his family took me in and treated me as one of their own when everyone else

treated me like the weird little outcast that I was.” Sebastian paused. “It was the closest I’ve ever come to experiencing a real family.”

“How did he end up with your sister then? How could he fall for someone who idolized your dad when he knew what they were doing to you?”

Sebastian furrowed his brow and looked up with a vexed tilt of his head. How could someone be so perceptive, yet so frustratingly blind at the same time? “His parents may have noticed that something was off with me, but I never told anyone about what happened in our house. Too much shame. By the time we were in high school, I was finding every excuse I could to spend time over with Joe’s family. My dad had already tried to put a stop to it by sending me to a different school, but there wasn’t much he could do short of moving us away to a different state without raising suspicions.”

Aaron searched Sebastian with scrupulous eyes. How did Sebastian’s story share so many similarities to his own but he had never shared before now? Was Sebastian making all of this up just to mirror his own pain and bond with him?

“When I moved out and joined the military, I began to unconsciously break contact with them. Both of my parents took that as an affront and that’s when they sicked my sister on Joe.”

“Wait. What? You mean to tell me that your parents were so offended by you moving away, that they hatched a plan to set your sister up with your best friend and your sister just went along with it?”

Sebastian nodded his head. “Yeah, I know. It sounds insane, but narcissists have this compulsion to completely annihilate those that they perceive as threats or have somehow wronged them; and there’s no such thing as too much collateral damage or

innocent casualties when it comes to protecting their bruised egos.” He let out a heavy breath. “My mom just played along with it because she thought having my friend around might lure me back.”

“And your sister was just ok with them making this giant life decision for her?”

“Why not? They had already chosen her career path. Chose her college. Paid for everything. And she had this ingrained desire to please our dad because he had pedestaled her our entire childhood just to use her as a tool to tear me and Levi down.” Sebastian closed his eyes. “Joe didn’t stand a chance. He was just a college freshman and she was eight years older than us and incredibly beautiful, according to my friends. Must’ve gotten it from our mom before our dad ground it out of her. Joe was wrapped around her little finger by the time I was out of boot camp and they got married during my first deployment.”

Aaron couldn’t sense any deception as Sebastian emptily stared down at the water.

“Holy fuck, Sebastian. Your family somehow makes me grateful that I didn’t have to stick around with mine and got to choose a new one instead.”

“Yeah, families don’t always live up to expectations, do they?”

“So why would you want to spare your sister? What she did was absolutely fucked.”

“I want to spare Joe. The only reason he got sucked into that mess was because of me. He didn’t deserve that. And he absolutely loves his family, even my sister. He doesn’t deserve to lose that. He’s a good dad. And the Taylors don’t deserve to lose their son and grandkids.” Sebastian stared into Aaron’s eyes. “I need the suffering to stop with me.”

“Ok. I’ll send word up and see what I can do.” Aaron paused.
“No guarantees, though.”

*You like the way the water tastes,
like on fire.
You knew but it was never safe.
Take one more cause it’s coming round
Be aware the water!
Be aware the water!*

Chapter 30

Don't fret Precious, I'm here.

Step away from the window.

Go back to sleep.

Safe from Pain and Truth and Choice and other poison devils,

See, they don't give a fuck about You, like I do.

"Hey Sebastian how are you coming along on those biometrics?"

"This is the last one." By far his most hated chore, Sebastian hated everything about collecting the data. He hated having to wipe off their hands with fresh baby wipes because blood would inevitably drip down their arms and drench their hands before he got to the fingerprint scans. He hated having to hold their resisting eyelids open to scan their retinas. He hated how their mouths would flop open and their tongues would unresistingly droop out whenever he let go. He hated how he had to cut into their veins to try and collect a fresh blood sample when he could have just scooped it out from the pools collecting on the floor around them.

"Why do we have to collect this data?"

"Because we need to verify it for the databases."

"But why can't they just take our word for it? I can confirm that this is Mark Jacobs without having to deal with all of this extra bullshit." Sebastian looked down at his uncle's limp form. There wasn't a chance that they had somehow got the wrong family.

Aaron looked up from his workstation. "Because they need to verify that the targets have actually been terminated. I told you, we had too many agents compromised, so we have to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that these targets have been dealt with. We can also use the DNA samples to compare them against other databases."

“What? Like the FBI’s? What for?”

“You’d be surprised at what these types are capable of.”

“Seriously?”

“I mean, it’s not like every other target is going to be a pedophile or something, but there’s still a significant chance that they’ll be connected to some heinous shit. Probably like a five, ten percent chance.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The shit’s a lot more rampant than you’d think. Even if the other databases don’t turn anything up, nine times out of ten, these types will have submitted samples to 23andMe or Ancestry.com and we compare against those databases to build out familial networks. It’s been really useful in filling out missing pieces to some of the more secretive networks and we’re also learning quite a bit about DNA predictors for certain types of pathologies.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.” Aaron smiled. “I see that look in your eyes, fucker. Don’t pretend like it’s not interesting.”

Sebastian gave a sheepish grin. “Yeah, obviously I’m going to make you tell me more about it, but it still doesn’t mean I want to do this morbid-ass shit.”

“It wouldn’t be science without soul-crushing data collection!”

Sebastian couldn’t help but laugh at Aaron’s joke. Aaron had listened to Sebastian bitch about the tedium of data collection for far too long to not twist it around and throw it back in his face. He had to give Aaron this one.

Aaron joined the laughter. “I’ll tell you all about it in the car. I just gotta finish this up.” Aaron went back to typing away on the computer set up in the home office.

Go back to sleep. Count bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drums.

Aaron held his phone up and Sebastian heard the series of confirming rings of the digital security system sing out before the electronic motor whirled the lock open.

"It's insane to me that you're just allowed to wield this much power." Sebastian shook his head incredulously.

"Bro, this isn't even my secret squirrel training. I was doing this type of 'hacking' by middle school to get me and my friends into the same classes and shit."

"Dude, I just watched you unlock someone's house in thirty seconds without even trying. How was that not done with a super-encrypted CIA phone or some shit?"

"Because I'm doing it through their modems."

"Their modems?"

"Yeah dude, people are fucking idiots. They spend all this time setting up their home Wi-Fi networks and attaching all of their encrypted devices and security systems to them, but no one ever bothers to change the manufacturer's password on the modem. So I just find the modem type on the network and look up the manufacturer specs to find the default password, which is usually just 'password'." Aaron chuckled

"You can't be serious." Sebastian couldn't believe that Aaron's cyber security stuff could boil down to something so simple.

"Yeah dude, I am. I'm literally just walking up to their digital front door and just letting myself in."

Sebastian put on a shameful grin as he began to connect the dots. "Sooo I set up the home network in Tucson..."

"Yeah, I know. I fixed all of the security deficiencies you god damn digital illiterate." Aaron let out a wry chuckle. "But yeah,

if it wasn't for me, your whole life – email, cloud, google drive, subscription services, *your incognito searches*, anything that you did on a device that was connected to that network– would have been available for the whole world to see and literally anyone could have come in and stolen all of your shit and changed all of your passwords and there would have been nothing you could do about it.”

“Well thanks for doing that, I guess.” Sebastian chuckled.

“What can I say? I just get really frustrated with technology.”

“You know, for someone that rails so much against the boomers...”

“Don't you dare finish that thought!”

Aaron's smile was infectious. “Ok, but I do have a point there. Case in point, though, I've taken over control of Mr. Felder's phone number and have taken over the entire Felder family group chat. Sounds like we're going to have to make preparations for eighteen bodies and the first ones are going to start trickling in here in a few hours. You get to do all of the bitch work since you refuse to adapt to the twenty-first century.”

“Yeah, that sounds fair.” The pair continued their lighthearted banter as they made themselves at home.

Go back to sleep. Count bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drum.

Sebastian snapped the button on the stopwatch. 21.3 seconds. That was how long it took the lead vehicle to traverse the distance between the two monuments of rocks they had set up exactly 1,320 feet apart along the empty back road flanked by pine forests. Sebastian quickly moved his finger down the precalculated chart.

“Forty-two.”

Aaron's left hand expertly moved forward to spin the dial one click clockwise without having to raise his head and sacrifice his cheek weld. Sebastian raised the binoculars to his eyes and began mouthing off sequential numbers.

"Twelve confirmed. Sixteen possible." He lowered the binoculars and settled in behind his primary weapon.

Aaron took in a breath, efficient but not rushed, and just as he reached the top of his breath, the trigger clicked back. The deafening roar of the rifle sent a temporary haze across Sebastian's brain as he adjusted to the sensory overload. Aaron sent his shooter hand forward and unlatched the bolt, pulled it back, and shot it forward in one swift movement. His arm was just a mechanical piston, custom-crafted within a single degree of tolerance for the sole purpose of guiding the rifle's cycle of operations. Sebastian felt the spent brass graze his cheek as he readjusted his scope to catch the tail end of the scene unfolding.

There was a hole drilled in the windshield of the lead vehicle and perfectly centered on the driver's face, or where the driver's face would have been if Aaron hadn't just painted the inside of the cab in an explosive red. In a flash, the Ford F-250 Dually was sent careening off the road in an uncontrolled roll. The three bodies in the truck's bed were immediately ejected into spiraling arcs while the two remaining bodies in the cab were subjected to the intolerable G's as they were tossed around in the crumpling metal. It all happened so fast that no one in the truck could have possibly heard the thunderous shot in time to register what was happening and search for the accompanying flash, not that it would have mattered. Aaron's elevated hide could have kept them hidden while they picked off battalions of men searching for them.

The second vehicle reacted with a jerky movement that pulled them into the embanking ditch and launched them into a

power pole. Aaron raised his hand again and clicked his dial back four clicks. The third vehicle was able to avoid the immediate carnage but stopped to aid the rest of the convoy. Five silhouettes poured out of the SUV and immediately tried to assume “tactical” positions – all tried to form a 360°, two immediately got in the prone, two tried to take covered positions in one of the ditches, and one ran backwards before changing his mind and trying to run back to the safety of his vehicle.

“Vic two is yours.” Aaron unceremoniously dropped the confused fighter before he could make it back to the cover of his vehicle. A second shot rang out accompanied by ringing brass, followed quickly by a third. Aaron took another breath and dropped the next two with an uninterrupted cadence.

Whereas Aaron’s shooting clicked back and forth like a calibrated metronome, Sebastian’s shooting was much more disjointed, despite his semi-automatic shooting platform. The first passenger stepped out of the front of the truck’s cab and in his anticipation, Sebastian shouldered the rifle forward to accommodate the pending recoil, sending the shot into the truck’s engine side panel. He quickly took another breath and sent a lucky shot into the fleeing target’s back. He finished filling his lungs and held his breath deep within as he centered on the dazed driver’s head and took his headshot. He tried to use the same breath as he refocused on the third figure emerging from the passenger side but saw the scope’s agitated shaking from the tensing muscles and released his breath. Aaron took care of the shot on his way to mopping up the survivors from the lead vehicle. Sebastian took in a deep, centering breath and focused on the fourth and final target from his car. He took his shot and embedded the round dead center into the figure’s back. Everything about the shot finally felt right. He took another confident shot at the twitching

figure's head but was disappointed when he saw the spark sent off of the pavement about a foot to the right.

Sebastian shifted his body weight to the right to help Aaron with the lead vehicle but couldn't find a single body with an intact head. He quickly rescanned the area but there was nothing available left to shoot at. Fifteen dead in under a minute. None of them had stood a chance against Aaron.

"Bunch of cosplaying assholes." Aaron removed his empty magazine and reached over Sebastian to pick up the first six round magazine that had been emptied and tossed over Sebastian in the fray before tucking his tools away in the open pelican case that had been neatly laid to his left. "Welp, let's go see if they left us with anything good."

Go back to sleep. Count bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drum.

The full moon softly lit their path as Sebastian and Aaron stalked their way up the street. When they arrived at their destination, they found a house at the end of a long driveway that wound between terraces of lawn and recessed behind patches of trees. Guarding the entrance of the driveway was a gate that was apparently for decorations only, as the pair just left the road thirty feet early and walked around the stunted wall on the pedicured grass.

In a ceremonial roundabout just behind the gates stood three draped flag poles. On the left-hand pole was the Louisiana state flag proudly sporting its pelican that overlooked the values that it only half-heartedly accepted. On the right, was the true American flag, raised to half-mast and inverted with the long bars sitting on top of the box of fifty equal stars. At the top of the central and tallest flagpole, waved the most unholy perversion of their most sacred symbol; a mockery of the flag that they so desperately tried to fortify their faith in. The valorous red and just, vigilant blue had been replaced with a

vile black while the purity of the central white bar had been violated with an insidious cerulean blue to mark the police state the bootlickers had so blasphemously heralded. Underneath this most heinous desecration was still more unapologetic perversions as they continued to fly their 'Traitor 2020' flag underneath.

"Fuck these people." Aaron's face stoked a rage that would have been visible in the darkest night.

"Agreed. Burn them at the stake?"

"Yeah."

They couldn't have desecrated their most cherished symbol more if they had used it as a septic tank filter and tossed it to be devoured by roaches. At least they had remembered to put a light on it at night, though.

The pair quietly discussed their plans and twisted on their silencers as they hiked up the driveway. Aaron's skills weren't even required when they stopped at the entrance, instead just reaching out his hand and gingerly pressing down on the door handle's button and pushing; the silly fools had gone for so long without challenge, were so sure of their divine protections, that they didn't even bother to take the most rudimentary precaution of locking their front door.

The pair wound their way up the grand staircase and split apart at the top. Aaron made his way to the boys' room while Sebastian made his way to the daughter's. He silently opened the door and combat-glided until he stood just above the sleeping girl. He raised his pistol until it leveled on the centerline formed by the opposing pig tails and turned his head. He had already had his fill of administering his mercies to children and couldn't bring himself to witness another one. Three hushed flashes went off in the second story windows

before the silhouetted pair rejoined and made their way downstairs.

Sebastian took out two pairs of centimeter-thick zip-tie handcuffs and a roll of duct tape from out of Aaron's pack and handed a pair to Aaron before zipping the pocket back up.

They emerged from the house with the couple bound at their hands and gagged with multiple lines of tape across their faces. Each held their captive by the hands bound in prayer as they silently dragged them down the driveway behind them.

Sebastian loosed the flag line from its figure eight slip line and lowered the flags until they draped over the couple as Aaron held their hands up and duct taped them to the pole. Sebastian pulled out a quart of lighter fluid from Aaron's pack and doused them while Aaron stood by with his lighter, setting them aflame as soon as Sebastian was free without so much as a ceremonious sentencing.

Go to Sleep! Go to Sleep! Go to Sleep! Go to Sleep! Go to Sleep!

"Welp, all of those biometrics finally paid off!" Aaron was excited to share his new development with Sebastian.

"What are you talking about?"

"Our next targets..."

"Yeah?"

"Turns out the husband actually was a pedo. I hacked into his hard drives and found terabytes of heinous shit. Tipped off the local law enforcement and they already got him in custody."

"That's great!" Sebastian quickly remembered the innocent sacrifices that had to be made for their justice to materialize and quickly tempered his enthusiasm. "What about the rest of the family?"

"I suspect the wife was privy to everything and turned a blind eye, just like...well, the police are currently investigating her."

“So, they’re going to arrest her, too? What about the children?”

“I couldn’t fully verify it, but I don’t see a possible way for her husband to get away with some of the stuff that I saw without her knowing about it. She could have very well been helping him. We’re going to get a bit of the fates to work in our favor here, though. Turns out both of their parents were low-tier targets that were slotted for deletion and they’re driving in for support tonight. Going to stage it as a murder-suicide of the whole family. It’ll be the best thing for the kids.”

Sebastian sighed and stared into the clouds. “Yeah, sounds like the most merciful option.” He wondered how long it would take for him to deconstruct these beliefs and start carrying the full weight of his decisions.

Count bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drums!
Count bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drums!
Count bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drums!

Sebastian watched as the pieces of torn leaves falling from his hand gently disturbed the serenity of the water as he dangled his feet from over the edge of the pier. He desperately wished to turn his tears back on but his mother never got around to warning him of the danger of accessing their gift so frequently. His ears perked up and he swiveled his head around to the sound of footsteps making their way across the creaking planks behind him.

“Alex? What are you doing here?” Sebastian couldn’t bear the shame of his friend witnessing him at his lowest.

“I’ve joined the cause.” Alex’s gravelly voice was void of concern.

“Where’s Sarah? What about Tommy?” Sebastian couldn’t make sense of the incomprehensible information ambushing him. “Why do you have that mark?!”

"They're not here." Alex looked forlornly across the gulf as he took his seat next to Sebastian.

Sebastian looked into his friend's face and could only find Levi's hopelessness. He understood but couldn't bring himself to express the grief that he felt for his brother. He limply hung his head and stared down at the concentric circles floating out from under his feet.

"Yeah Sebastian, Alex is going to be your new spotter." Aaron had managed to sneak in undetected behind the cover of Alex's heavy steps. Sebastian didn't even bother to turn and acknowledge his accomplice. He had already seen this scenario play out a thousand times in his mind and couldn't bring himself to watch it play out again with such genuine certainty; but he wasn't going to let Aaron go without fully admitting his transgression.

"What do you mean *my spotter*? Where are you going?"

Aaron sighed, "I've been reassigned to Ohio."

"Oh? Did they reassign you or did you request it? Let me guess, you're going to Cleveland."

"Yeah, I'm going to Cleveland."

"Fuck you, Morson."

Aaron glared at the back of his brother's head. "Sebastian, I'm sorry but Katrina needs me. I have to be there to protect her."

"And I needed you in Tucson. I need you now. You sat here and helped me burn my entire world to the ground and the whole time you knew you were going to fuck off back to *her*."

"You made your decisions! You knew what you were doing! I didn't have to coerce you! There was no deception!"

"That's right, Aaron. I fully understood what was going to happen and chose to follow because I had no other belief to

cling onto. Look at Alex,” Sebastian gestured his thumb over at their empty friend, “He was there when you were at your lowest and picked you up. Now he’s descended to our level and desperately needs you. And you’re just going to leave him here? *With me?!?*”

“What? You aren’t going to take care of him out of spite?”

“Aaron! I can’t even take care of myself!”

“I’m sorry brother...”

“STOP FUCKING CALLING ME THAT! YOU DON’T FUCKING RATE!”

“I’d have taken you with me, but I knew you couldn’t make peace with her.”

“That’s right.” Sebastian took in a deep, calming breath. “If she had asked you to kill me, you would’ve done it, wouldn’t you?”

“Sebastian, what are you talking about?! She didn’t ask me to do that...and you’ve wanted to die ever since I met you...”

“That’s beside the point, Aaron. If I’d ever raised my voice or stood up for myself to call her out on all of her bullshit, she would’ve taken offense and told you to kill me; and you would’ve done it without question. Wouldn’t you have?”

Aaron held his head proudly as he stepped out from Sebastian’s cornering. “Yeah, I would’ve.”

“That isn’t love Aaron. I don’t know what that is, but it isn’t love. Not for you and not for me.”

Aaron heaved a heavy sigh. “I don’t know what to tell you Sebastian.”

“You should just kill me then. Because if I ever run across that stupid cunt again, I’m going to break every bone in her body and exact the vengeance you withheld from my parents.”

“Fine.” Morson pulled out his sidearm and racked a round.

“You better have a second bullet for me too if you pull that trigger, Aaron.”

Aaron froze. He was torn between doing right by his country and protecting those that he loved most. Sebastian felt the familiar twinge of disappointment as he heard him holster his pistol and stomp off.

*I'll be the one to protect you from your enemies and all your
Demons.*

*I'll be the one to protect you from a will to Survive and a voice of
reason.*

*I'll be the one to protect you from your enemies and your
Choices, Son.*

They're one in the same.

I must isolate you. Isolate and save you from yourself.

Chapter 31

*I'm becoming less Defined
as days go by,
Fading away; and, well,
you might say,
I'm losing focus;
kinda drifting into the abstract
in terms of how I see myself.*

"All right I'm running point and you're just support on this one." Alex's tone was sharp and alert. For months he had taken the form of a mindless beast just performing his instinctual duties in the natural world, but something about being this far north had given him a renewed energy.

"You sure we don't need to take a second for me to read up on this one?" Sebastian finished buttoning up the collar of his oxford shirt that completed his undercover uniform.

"Nah, in and out. Nothing to it. Let's get going." It wasn't quite excitement, and it wasn't quite nervousness, but Sebastian could sense something urgent in Alex's tone. Could he somehow be coming back around despite the sorrows surrounding them? Sebastian surely hoped so; he didn't have much left to give and would need someone else to shoulder the bulk of the load soon.

Sebastian reached behind his friend and snatched his pack up before making a quick exit from the truck. The sprawling parking lot engulfing the secluded megastructure was empty, save for a voodoo blue Toyota Tundra and new luxury sedan sitting in front of the little receiving office at the far end of the parking lot.

"One sec. Gotta get something from the back."

Sebastian heard the heavy fall of the tailgate, followed by the clanking of hardened plastic and metal alongside Alex's labored

breaths as he shifted their gear around. Sebastian walked around to see what extra gear Alex was preparing for such an innocuous target.

“What are you looking for?”

“Just this.” Alex finished freeing his thirty-six-inch-long hooligan tool from underneath their supplies.

“Ok you ready?” Sebastian didn’t think much of the breacher’s tool. These places always had excessively burdensome doors with overbuilt locks for some inexplicable reason. Something about His grandeur. Something about His kingdom. Sebastian knew it was all conflicting bullshit and every choice was made to feed their vanity. No matter what the actual reason was, Alex was probably right, and the multi-purpose tool would probably come in handy for something. Better to have it and not need it, than to have to make the long walk back to the truck to get it.

Alex held the steel bar by the clawed end and hoisted its dual end over his shoulder.

“Let’s get to it.”

Sebastian took off in step with Alex who was quickly approaching a double-time march. Sebastian stared up in marveled disgust at the monument to gluttonous shame and human misery. The architecture reminded him of a permanent big top tent. At the ground level, rectangular concrete pilons jutted out and stood over sixteen feet tall while elongated panes of glass filled in the voids to give the illusion of airy entrances to the interior; the roof spired in wedges around an apex that sat slightly off-center to the north, and each sliver would unevenly sit on top of each other with their triangular gaps filled in by a slit of windows that would grow with the gaps until they reached the structure’s outer circumference.

The doors at the front entrance were chained shut, but Alex's prybar made quick work of the obstruction and the pair quietly made their way in. The structure's foyer was a long processional hallway that led to a grand opening into the grotesquely empty event space, simultaneously alit by the grandiose exterior windows and overshadowed by the reinforced concrete required to support so much weight.

The hallway was flanked on either side by a series of ornately jambed, wooden doors. with artificial light spilling out of the last door that was slightly open and emanating two unapologetic voices discussing their most base fears.

"Stop worrying, honey! People are just afraid to come out because of this war. But you'll see; God's will shall be done in the war and we'll come out stronger than ever! In the meantime, we're just going to keep pushing the online donations and wait for them to come back to the fold. You'll see, we'll be back to where we were by the Christmas season. God bless!"

"Stop lying to me! I handle the books and I've seen that our base revenues are down ninety percent! And those liberals have cut off our PPP loans because they say we aren't essential and would rather spend it on that stupid war!"

"And that's why we must stay faithful! We must remain faithful and make our sacrifices now, just like Noah and his family; and you'll see, god's judgement will come washing over these lands and cleanse us of those evil Sadducees along with their slothful supporters suckling at their welfare teats!"

"Sounds like things are pretty dire for you." Alex stepped around the corner in one smooth motion while the distraught couple pivoted around like deer caught in headlights. "Even more difficult than during the plague, huh?"

“Can I help you, sirs?” The man spoke with an incredulous edge that spoke to his true ignorance of his precarious situation, but the secretary blushed with the flustering shame of having one’s misdeeds brought into the light. Sebastian caught her stealing a glance towards her purse that now sat tantalizingly out of reach and saw the pink-handled concealed-carry that she was considering. He took a couple preparatory steps towards the purse but chose to leave the option ‘open’ for her out of a dangling curiosity.

Alex swiveled one of the empty chairs around from one of the nearby desks with his tool and took a seat. “Nope,” Alex scoffed, “we don’t need your ‘help’.”

“What’s this about then?”

“Those are pretty nice cars out front, a 2021 BMW M Series and a 2020 Tundra TRD Pro; doesn’t seem like your church is hurting all that bad, considering there’s a war going on around us, no? You do know that there’s a war right now, yes?”

“Our finances are none of your business!”

“A BMW seems a little excessive for an unmarried church secretary, no?”

“That car is registered to the church and she uses it for church-sponsored activities. Now what’s this about?”

“You know, I couldn’t help but notice that you were calling her ‘honey’. That’s a pretty intimate name for a married pastor to be calling his secretary. Not nearly as intimate as some of the things you said you were going to do to her in that BMW that I found in this email, though.” Alex pulled out his phone and began scrolling. “Should I read some of it to you?”

The minister puffed out his chest while his mistress took cover behind him. She looked to be about forty years his younger, but given his advanced age, that would still easily put her in her

early forties. Sebastian could tell that, even at her most youthful and vibrant, she could never have been much of a great beauty. That must have been why she could have allowed such a grotesque geriatric to touch her in the ways that Alex was describing; because he held the status and wealth that she never would have been able to attract in a genuine partner. It was an affliction that plagued so many American women of his generation. The elderly pastor had probably chosen her because she was just readily available prey, and he was too tired to go out searching for something more appetizing.

"I don't know, but this sounds like the type of scandal that can be the final nail in the coffin for a struggling church, no?"

"What is it you want?"

Sebastian caught glimpses of his father's empty hatred as the stranger entranced his pale blue eyes into a hateful scowl focused on Alex. His rubbery skin hung off of his jowls and seemed to form incomplete mimicries of facial expressions like one of those silicon-encased android prototypes.

"I got a chance to take a look at some of your finances before we got in here. If your 990 tax forms are to be believed, then this church really is struggling."

"Yes, we don't have anything for y..."

"But then I noticed that your personal accounts never had withdrawals, only large deposits, and it's also a little odd that you can make all-cash purchases for things like those nice cars out front, and I thought to myself, 'Hey, if I had an all-cash business, what would I do to hide my income and assets?' So, I looked for large purchases of security measures, and wouldn't you know it, there was a charge of \$16,696 to a contractor named Bullseye Lock and Safe when you were renovating this little addition five years ago."

“Oh Lord, thank you Lord, help me with this, let us pray...” The minister revealed an upsettingly perfect set of veneers behind the most sinister smile as he muttered out his empty prayer to no one in particular. “So what? You think you came across some emails and you think you’re going to extort us for our church’s money? Let me tell you something, the offerings we take in will be put towards the glory of god and he will smite thee evil sinners down before you see a single dime of it!” The preacher injected a fiery reverence into his meaningless accolade, “Glory to god!”

“Just to be clear, you’re opting for the difficult way here, yes? You don’t care if I send out these series of emails out to your congregation? I mean there’s some good ones in here; like this one where you call them ‘easily pliable nimrods’ and this other one where your secretary here laughs about using their tithes for a Cabo vacation.”

“Send them out! I already told you that you won’t see a single cent from this church. That money is ours and our god will punish you! You...You...You sodomites!”

At the full realization that Alex’s threat would go unchallenged, the secretary leaped out from behind the desk and lunged towards her purse. Sebastian took three measured strides towards her goal and backhanded her to the ground in front of Alex before she even came within arm’s reach of her salvation. Alex lifted her chin with his adze blade and stared into her completely unremarkable face.

“Don’t worry miss, this will all be over soon enough.”

A fire stoked in the woman’s eyes and she leapt up towards Sebastian, frantically throwing clawed hands towards his face but sent downwards with one definitive right hook. The woman laid senseless on the floor, but in that one fit of survival, Sebastian had finally answered one of his lingering questions that had gone unanswered for over a decade.

*Yes, I am alone,
but then again,
I always was
As far back as I can tell,
I think maybe it's because...*

For years he had wondered why the Afghani farmers hadn't launched more robust guerrilla campaigns against the American forces. Why most of them were content to coexist with the occupying forces, when they outnumbered the invading Americans three hundred to one. Sure, the Americans had superior training, artillery, night vision, and air support of every possible type, but the indigenous population knew the land and had a divine purpose to pick up arms, didn't they? Why had it only taken three weeks for two platoons of Marines to completely crush an entire region's will to fight? Obviously, they had never stood a chance when they stood up and faced the war demons head on, but why hadn't more of the young Jihadis picked up a dragunov and started picking off the invaders one by one on their unsupported squad patrols? Why hadn't more gone and dug up their Russian mortar tubes and begun late-night harassments of their completely isolated patrol bases? Why weren't there more IED's and ambushes planted along their easily predictable supply routes to eliminate the MRAP's so overladen with heavy armor that any deterrence from the paved roads would have rendered them completely ineffective? Any number of guerilla tactics could have successfully demoralized the invaders and worn them down until their leaders threw their hands up in exasperation and sent them home. Sure, plenty of Afghanis would've died, but then again, they'd have surely driven them out much more quickly with much fewer casualties overall than their indifferent attrition produced.

They never even tried, though. They just chose to keep their heads down and wait out the 'war'. And all throughout this

most recent bout of cleansing, virtually none of his American victims tried to put up a fight when faced with the inevitability of their reckoning either.

The reason was so simple. They all had something to live for. They all had something to lose. Most don't assume their consciousness and immediately begin seeking their escape. Most aren't conditioned from birth to believe that they have no value. Most would never see his murders as the mercies that he knew them to be. Most had hoped that their cooperation could salvage at least a piece of their life or legacy from his consuming judgement.

*...Because You were never really real to begin with
I just made You up to hurt myself;
And it worked, yes it did*

"I couldn't help but notice that all of the doors in that entrance hallway were perfectly aligned and evenly spaced, save for one conspicuous gap right next door," Alex held the heavy bar and pointed it to the right like it was an instructor's yardstick, "It's almost as if there's an inaccessible space next door. I don't suppose we'd find an entrance to a room behind, I don't know...that bookshelf?" Alex pointed to a conspicuous-looking bookshelf that had the same dimensions as a door and shallow recesses that held rows of identical Bibles and hymnals.

Sebastian took his cue and walked over to the safe door and began dumping volumes of the empty texts to the floor before he came across the keyhole and handle that he was looking for. He returned to the secretary's side and dumped out her purse onto the floor but found no corresponding keys. He knelt down and rolled her unresponsive body over to find a gold necklace with a cross pendant and key tucked away in front of her heart. He snatched the chain off her person and unlocked the door which silently swung open to reveal a reinforced steel door with a ten-digit keypad above the lock.

The pastor let out a sinister chuckle, "I told you that you won't see a single cent from our church!" The man's lips may have been smiling, but his eyes kept narrowing down into hateful irations, like a resentful rat that was searching for its way out of a snare. "And you will be punished for being so proud to believe that you could steal from the one true god!" The pastor still hadn't taken the time to notice the unconscious body lying on the floor not even twelve feet away from him.

Sebastian noticed that the keypad had a series of buttons with the numbers worn off to varying degrees and began searching through the contents of the woman's purse for the corresponding combination.

"Oh please, Mr. Arland. You really think that a few gauges of steel is really going to stop us? Tell me, did you have them vault the entire inside of that room with steel walls? Or could I just take this tool here and smash through the drywall right there? Or maybe crawl in through the AC ducts?"

Sebastian held up a wallet and punched in the eight-digit code he had found. The door gave a confirming beep and clicked open on the second try.

"Or we could just use her birthday."

Inside the vault was an overabundance of liquidity – overflowing piles of cash that would fill multiple duffel bags; neatly stacked ingots, coins, and thin bars of gold, silver, platinum and other precious metals; gaudy displays of intricately crafted watches and gauche jewelry; stacked shelves of hoarded artwork.

Sebastian let out an impressed whistle at the sight. "Jesus! What are we running a riverboat casino in here or what?"

"Fine take it all then! Just like Job, the lord will rebless us with riches ten times over! There's no need to extort me further and air out our dirty laundry. She didn't do anything wrong." The

pastor finally acknowledged his scape goat, hoping that her innocence could provide a protective barrier against his corrupted name.

“Hmmm extort. That’s a funny word, isn’t it? It’s pretty ironic that you accuse me of it when you don’t even understand my intentions. But I wonder what you’d call using the threat of eternal damnation to steal from your entire congregation?”

“We didn’t steal from anyone!” The minister waved his hand to cut off Alex’s thought, completely oblivious to the imminent threat. “Our congregation tithes because that’s what the Bible tells us to do! That money is for the glory of god! It takes a lot of money to do what we do!”

“Yeah, I’m sure it takes a lot of money for all of this.” Alex gestured up and down at the gaudy figure standing in front of him in a luxury tailored suit that hung from his frail frame like an erect corpse without a coffin. “I’m sure that your congregation didn’t need that money for their silly luxuries like rent and medicine.”

“We’re spreading the word of God here! Last year we...” The man looked upwards searchingly while snapping his fingers to convey his recollection of the fabricated numbers. “We brought over twenty-two million people to the Lord Jesus Christ with our televangelism series.”

“And how many did you condemn to death with your anti-vax conspiracies that you pushed just so your congregation would keep attending and supporting this lifestyle of yours?”

“No, I did not! And don’t you dare say that I did!” The man’s programmed smile lingered into an unsettling mask. “The *China virus* wasn’t our fault! We were offering comfort and divine protection during such an evil time!”

“But you don’t believe that practical solutions like vaccines and masks and social distancing would have protected them?”

The stranger walked around the expansive desk that separated the standoff and brought himself to rest in front of Alex with his hands propping himself up on the desk that now stood behind him.

"You must be getting your information from those evil reporters that came sniffing around last year trying to twist my words. Let's see if we can't undo some of that evil now. No, I didn't say that the vaccines don't work." The expired preacher wagged his raggedy finger in Alex's face. "I said that healing and protection were only available through him..." He pointed his finger skywards and began shaking it with feigned fervor, "...because through him all things are possible."

"Kind of convenient that your preaching style aligns with your congregation showing up to your services; something your secretary here astutely pointed out is heavily correlated to your church's revenues. So how am I supposed to believe that you weren't preaching this for your own personal gain? For this obscene amount of wealth?" Alex gestured towards the vault overflowing with excess.

"Yes, I'm a very wealthy man." There was no shame in his voice; the televangelist truly believed that he deserved all of his hoarded gifts that had been conned from his congregation. "God has blessed me, for if you read in Galatians, chapter 3, If...you...belong...to...christ" He held up his hand in an ok gesture and struck it forward in time with his cadence so that the imaginary pen he held could help him drive his point home, "...then...are you Abraham's seed...and heirs" The man's eyes lit up in satisfaction "according to *his* promise...and his promise was great wealth."

"Soooo, God wants us all to be wealthy and happy?" Alex lowered his weapon and began to idly spin it on its top.

"Yes! Exactly!" The senile sermonizer chuckled as he began to let himself believe that Alex was just as wretched as him and

could be corrupted so easily with the empty promises of unearned riches. "A lot of my wealth doesn't come from offerings, either. Did you know that we lease most of our land for ranching? Another thing, we invest, uhhhh, something in the neighborhood of two hundred and fifty million in the poor. Can't do that when being broke." He settled deeper into his disquieting laugh as his belief in his gamesmanship grew.

Sebastian winced at the outlandish figure the prosperity preacher threw out. How could these pathological liars not see how ridiculous their fabrications sounded? How were they so inept at their craft? Why would they not make up something a little more subtle and believable? Something that couldn't be readily refuted with the information immediately available to their intended victims? How did they ever successfully convince anyone of their lies?

"So why are you the only one in your congregation that seems to be wealthy?"

"I used to be deep in debt and I started out with nothing, which is a different story, but god turned that around when I chose to fully follow him and start battling against the evils of this world."

"So, you started serving your god and he blessed you with wealth?" The preacher remained oblivious to Alex's toying.

"Yes! Exactly!" The man's dead smile continued to haunt the room.

"What exactly do you do to serve your god?"

"In the Book of Ephesians," Despite the man's vigorous headshaking, his unsettling smile refused to detach, "oh god I love this, in the Book of Ephesians it says, 'we wrestle not with people, but with principalities and powers unseen.'" He illustrated his conviction by smashing his index finger into his open palm while continuing to shake his head. "You see, we're

wrestling with the *principalities and powers unseen*,” The fear-mongering pastor cast a hateful shake with his head to condemn the words that followed, “I’m talking about the Rulers of the Darkness of this world. I’m talking about the Devil. He’s a very real Devil and He was the one who took all those souls from us with that *evil* China virus.”

Alex stopped spinning the iron bar and looked up with a devious smile. “Oh, I’m very aware of the Devil. I’ve seen him with my own two eyes.” Alex unbuttoned the collar of his buttoned-up disguise to reveal his long-since-healed tattoo. “Would you like me to show Him to you?”

The stranger widened his eyes to show his contempt at the Decimated man and stared him down to show his fearlessness “You’re those Decimated types that keep showing up on the news! Oh, you wicked sinners! Have you not murdered enough god-fearing Christians for those evil sodomites? God will punish you for the things that you’ve done to our people! Just like the Egyptians and the Babylonians and the Persians and the...”

More of the answers kept falling effortlessly into place in Sebastian’s curious mind as he listened to this stranger’s enraged lecture on fire and brimstone.

There is no you! There is only Me!

There is no you! There is only Me!

For so long he had wondered how so many of the Marines that had deployed with him could have become so complacent when they were constantly surrounded by potential enemies. Why were half of the posts at the company FOB always unmanned when they’d stop by for resupplies? And the ones that were attended to, had guards that would immediately take off their body armor and fashion it into little piles that they could recline on as they idly prepared their MRE’s and napped away their duties like housecats lazily basking away a mid-afternoon? Why were his team leaders able to go on every

patrol with only four rounds on their person? And the only reason they'd carry those extra 1.74 ounces was so that they could rack a round into their rifle upon leaving the wire and show three rounds in the top of their 'loaded' magazine just in case a squad leader spot-checked them.

The answer was still so simple. It was the same reason these traitorous liars were able to preach and glorify this abominable war for so long and then condemn him once their haughty hellscapes materialized. They were all relying on the monsters that hid among them; the Dents that faithfully carried an extra ninety pounds of weaponry and ammo on every patrol, always vigilant, always ready to strike out and suppress any perceived aggression; the Morsons and Postatas that would lay still in a single patch of grass, for weeks at a time behind their rifles, ready to drop any threat with a strike too quick to register; ready to call in thousands of pounds of ordnance just to atomize a single fighter that dared to raise arms against what had been sold to them as their family.

The only reason the kingsnake was able to thrive was because of the venomous coral snake's existence and threat. Just like the kingsnake, his platoonmates were able to continue their false posturing and speak of their supposed violence with intimate fondness without having to act on their words and make the required sacrifice to carry that venom. As long as there were enough among them that were already envenomed and willing to strike, then they'd never have to know what it was like to wield that burden. To shed that skin and reveal their true self.

Aaron was right, they were a bunch of cosplaying assholes. They never actually intended to act on their homicidal homilies because that would mean debasing themselves to Sebastian's level. They were only mimicking, just like this preacher. And all of his power was derived from the envenomed, the truly dehumanized. The only reason why he was able to infect his

followers' minds with his poisonous fears was because monsters like Sebastian brought those sermons to life.

For as much as this false prophet answered for Sebastian, he left him tantalized with so much more to ponder. This man clearly served no sanctified god, and yet, if he knew no god, then who did he believe was going to save him from the monsters facing him? How was he able to convince thousands to flock to him when he peacocked with lofty words that sounded just like Sebastian's darkest memories, and yet those same victims would instinctually shun Sebastian when they sensed his empowering intoxication? His violence had clearly failed as a deterrence for more violence and had only empowered these wretched imposters to enact more self-inflicted violence against the only thing that he cared about. If he continued down this path, would he only be enabling more infectious ideologies? Or could the Decimated direct all of their furies at the cowardly kingsnakes that hid amongst them and truly cleanse their home of the disease that brought them this low?

There is no fucking you! There is only Me!
There is no fucking you! There is only Me!

Alex cut off the man's lecture with a single raised finger that demanded acknowledgement and obedience.

"Don't your scriptures also say, 'that it's more difficult for a rich man to get into Heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle'?"

"Ahhh, but they also say that all things are possible *through him*." The stranger kept smiling his unsettling smile at Alex as he corralled him back into his comfortable lie.

"Oh, I've heard this sermon before from Ted and Sharon Hutchinson."

"Who?"

“Ted and Sharon Hutchinson. Do you not know who they are?”

The preacher stumbled as he tried to readjust his prepared argument. “Ted and Sharon Hutchinson...I mean the names are familiar, but I can’t recall any of their work off the top of my head.”

“They were two of your most faithful and devoted congregants. Every Sunday, they were out there in those pews, even all throughout the plague.”

“Ahhh yes I remember them now.” The deceiving zealot half-heartedly bowed his head as he divined where Alex was leading the conversation. “We’ve missed them for quite a while now.” The man held out his liver-spotted hands and clasped onto Alex’s hands that were welded onto his weapon, “father, thank you for bringing this man here today, thank you for giving me the opportunity to know Him, I pray that you continue to help Him heal as he grieves his parents. I pray that you continue to help Him know you better and ask that you continue to bless Him and His team, and I pray that His Peace will be successful.”

Alex threw off the preacher’s hands as his voice began to tinge with his stoking rage, “Your prayers never stopped Ted and Sharon from contracting the plague. But they survived their infection and you got to keep squeezing them for their ten percent because they were convinced that you had single-handedly delivered them from the plague.”

The pastor switched back to his pre-programmed smile. “Well, I’m blessed to have such a faithful congregation.”

“Yes, they were faithful. In fact, they were so convinced of your divine blessing that they ignored all of the prevailing science and went to visit their daughter, Sarah, and grandson, Tommy. Now, Sarah and Tommy were immunocompromised, and Sarah begged them not to visit, but they came anyways because you

had convinced them that God was on their side. Can you guess what happened next?"

The preacher gave a condemning shake of his head as he passionately deflected his blame. "They caught that evil *China virus*. That was the Devil's work."

"Yeah," Alex's eyes leveled deep into the depraved man's abyss, "Sarah and Tommy caught the virus and were hospitalized. And instead of putting their savings towards whatever scarce medical treatments were available for Sarah and Tommy, these people sent you a check for over twenty thousand dollars because you promised to pay for their daughter and grandson. Now, I know that you received their check because it was cashed, but did you pray for them?"

The pastor began stammering as his premeditated shock took hold of him. "Wh...Why....Why of course! We prayed for them night and day!"

"What was their last name?"

"What?"

"What was their last name?"

"I...I...I just can't recall it off the top of my head. We pray for so many here, it's hard to keep track of it all."

Alex shook his head at all of the poetic injustice.

"Jesus fucking christ, you're so fucking self-absorbed that you can't even be bothered to learn the names of your victims."

"How dare you take the lord's name in vain in his own temple!" The pastor raised a condemning finger towards the heavens, "The lord will not hold him guiltless..."

Before the old stranger could open his eyes from his fraudulent prayer, Alex had jockeyed himself up and swung the

hammering end of his tool around into the man's kneecap like a polo mallet.

The Preacher screamed out in searing agony, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING YOU FUCKING PSYCHO?!" He began to collapse under his crumbling supports, "OH YOU WICKED, WICKED SINNER! GOD WILL PUNISH YOU, YOU WICKED, WICKED SINNER! YOUR REVELATIONS WILL COME!"

"The only god you've ever worshipped is your own greed; and he's already snatched everything away from me. There's nothing more you can threaten me with." Alex smiled as he began patiently, calmly swinging his tool into the man, like a butcher making purposeful cuts into his meat.

*Now I am somewhere
I am not supposed to be,
And I can see things
I know I really shouldn't see,
And now I know why,
now, now, now I know why,
Things aren't as pretty on the inside.*

The woman took a gasping breath as her eyes shot open and heart started pumping faster as it tried to flush the ammonic stimulant from out of her system. With agitated furor, she crawled away Sebastian holding up the sharp-smelling salts under her nose as her brain frantically pieced together the threatening images from under her foggy consciousness.

"There, there you're awake now."

Alex's measured voice did little to reassure her as she took in the scene in front of her. Laying in front of her was the prosperity preacher, bloodied to a pulp and hunched over lifeless against the desk. Sebastian interrupted the visual as he stepped over her to continue emptying the vault.

"Miss Murphy, are you with us?"

The woman reactively shook her head no as she curled herself up into a ball and continued staring at her former adulterer, an unrecognizable mash of blood and bones now, but no less palatable than when he was alive. Alex waddled forward and snapped his fingers in front of her face.

"Miss Murphy, are you with us?"

She nodded her head yes.

"How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Th...Th...Three."

"Very good. Can you give me your name?" Alex stood up and made his way back to the desk.

"Amber Murphy." She spoke just above a whisper.

"Very good. Can you tell me where we are?" Alex popped open a can of Dr. Pepper and handed it to her.

"Church."

"Which church specifically?"

"Christ's Cross Church."

"Very good. Now I'm going to lay down quite a bit of information for you, so I'm going to need you to pay attention. Are you ready?"

Amber nodded her head and gingerly took a sip of her drink.

"As you may have already guessed, Mr. Arland here is dead. Some of it was blunt force trauma, but I'd say the bullet wounds from your gun here did most of the damage." Alex took the dainty pink pistol chambered in 9mm and wiped it down before placing it into her unresisting hand. "Now, we're going to let you go because you don't really serve a purpose for us if you die here, but I feel like I should explain some things to you because you might not be thinking clearly right now."

Amber's face settled into a disgruntled indignation as she stared up at her assailant calmly spelling out her new reality.

"You may be tempted to dig around in your purse for this," Alex held up the gun's spare magazine, "but that would be a bad idea. You may also be tempted to leave here and drive straight to the police station and tell them everything that you saw here today, but that would also be a very bad idea."

Alex paused to let the idea take hold. "Let me tell you why. I know that you embezzled over \$600,000 from the church with the help of Mr. Arland here. It only took me about ten minutes to find that information and I suspect it wouldn't take much longer than that for an investigating detective to come across that information, especially when you're the primary suspect in the investigation. Now, you may be wondering why you would be the prime suspect in the investigation if you just tell them about us, but you must remember that it was your gun there that was used to murder Mr. Arland."

Alex pulled out a phone and made a few decisive taps on it before tossing it back to its rightful owner.

"You should also remember that as of right now, you just forwarded a series of emails to the church's list serve detailing your years-long affair with Mr. Arland here. You should also remember that you were one of the only people with exclusive access to that vault there which is now empty and has no signs of breaking in. You should also remember that it was a habit of Mr. Arland's to disable all of the security alarms and cameras before your little trysts here."

Alex stepped forward and squatted down in front of her again. He peered forward to discern whether she fully grasped the gravity of her predicament.

"Now you may be able to describe my face in perfect detail – go ahead soak it all in – and you may be able to tell the police that

me and my friend here were Decimated sent to rob the church, but do you think that they'll believe you? You gotta ask yourself, what would the logic be behind two Decimated robbing a seemingly failing church fourteen months into a war? Why would any rational person believe that when they have you? A disgruntled lover and embezzling church employee with access to the security systems who came in here and decided to take what she had decided was hers. That's when Mr. Arland here interrupted you and tried to stop you; that's when you sent those emails off in a fit of passion; and that's when he did this," Alex gently stroked her swollen eye, "and that's when you went ahead and did that." Alex turned and gestured to the corpse staring back at them. "Then you went ahead and robbed the church blind using the keycodes that also happened to be your birthday."

"Why are you telling me all of this?" Amber had dropped the confused damsel act and stared down the interloper.

"To give you a fighting chance, of course." Alex took in an energized breath before setting his hands on his knees and springing himself up.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

Alex shrugged. "The way I see it, you have two real options here. The first one is you can drive home, draw a nice warm bath, maybe pour yourself a glass of wine and take a couple of those pain killers you got in your purse there and then use that gun on yourself. Or option number two, you can take that BMW and drive south to Mexico. That six hundred K won't buy you quite the lifestyle that it used to, but you could probably scrape out a few years down there in relative comfort while you figure out your next move. Personally, I'd choose the first option; things are going to keep getting much worse before they start getting any better."

"Welp, we're all loaded up. You almost done with her?"

"It looks like our time is done here Amber. What's it going to be?" Alex dangled her keys in front of her face.

Amber snatched her keys from his hand and stormed off without a word.

"She didn't seem too happy with your explanation. Which option do you think she's going to take?"

Alex shrugged, "If she has any sense, she'll take the easy way out."

The wheels of the turbocharged sedan squealed as Amber urged all 473 horses to lead her out of the parking lot and away from the irreverent desecraters emerging from the church.

"So, there's a diamond mine that I wanted to check out while we're up here. If we take the 71 south, we'll drive right by it on our way back down. I can drive."

"I'm not going back." There was a finality in Alex's voice that Sebastian had feared would come.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't do this anymore. It's all so meaningless now." Alex's hollowed eyes stared ahead.

Sebastian gently nodded his head in agreement. "I know. You've been done for a while now."

It was all so unfair. They had already sacrificed everything that they were in the name of this ideology that had been packaged and sold to them as the pinnacle of human enlightenment, a defining morality that trumped all others, to be cherished and protected at all costs; just to find out it was nothing but empty promises pushed by charlatans.

"Sorry to dip out on you like this again."

"Don't be. I understand."

Alex looked at his brother idly pondering the injustices of his world and searched for a salve that could comfort his oozing wounds.

“You know, I realize that you had this idea of me that I was this superhuman type that could accomplish anything that I set out to do, but that really wasn’t me; it was mostly Sarah. I’d pretty much given up after I got out, too. Before Sarah and Tommy, I never thought that life could be so wondrous. The tiniest pleasure became the most meaningful joy because they were there to share it with. Waking up in the morning was no longer an assaulting nightmare that I had to struggle through before I fell asleep again. My work had purpose again because everything I did was building towards a better future for Tommy.”

Sebastian gave a broken smile, “I know. It always sounded so magical when you talked about them.”

“I’m sorry you never got to experience that, Sebastian. I’m sorry we couldn’t just share that with you.”

The tears burned in Sebastian’s dried ducts. “Don’t be. Just getting to experience it vicariously through you guys was enough.”

“No Sebastian, I’m serious. You deserved to experience that joy too. I’m sorry for what happened with Aaron. I know that hurt you.”

“I’m serious too, Alex. Despite everything that happened with Aaron, I’m still thankful for everything that I got to experience with you and him. Y’all made all of this,” Sebastian gestured outwards with his hands to the open world around them, “feel more real. Being around the two of you was a relief that I never dreamed I could have ever deserved. I’m grateful for you two.”

The pair sat there for several minutes, quietly contemplating the vacuum facing them.

“So, what are you going to do instead?”

Alex shrugged, “I’m not sure. I know that nothing I do will really seem to have a purpose without them.”

“You want me to go ahead and punch your ticket for you?”

Alex laughed, “Nah, Sarah would never allow that.”

“So, what then?”

“I don’t know. For starters, I guess I’ll just see where this tank of gas will get me.”

“And then what?”

“Dunno. I guess see what good I can sow. I think investing all of that hoarded treasure in the community will be a good start.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice.”

“What about you? You want to come with me?”

Sebastian shrugged. “Nah, think I’m gonna finish out this war.”

“Still trying to escape, huh?”

Sebastian smiled as he turned to soak in his friend’s candid perception, “You know they would never allow that. Just going to keep up my violent protest against this cosmic joke.”

Alex smiled. “That’s why we love you, Sebastian. You keep trying despite the insanity. I hope you stop by to visit and try something different after all of this is over.”

“Yeah, I’ll try and stay in touch this time around.”

Sebastian sat there quietly contemplating Alex’s words as he watched his brother climb into his truck, give a honk and hollow wave, and drive out of the church parking lot as he headed north in search of something new and meaningful.

It was all just so unjust and nonsensical. He knew that their country would just complete its latest wounded lap until it

healed itself enough to descend back into the mire. This war would end, its viciousness would grind the d Decimated down into nothing and no one would remain to warn of the burdens that their violence required. More Machiavellians would take root in the cleared lands and use the images of his savagery to let the seeds of fear take root in the fertile minds of the next generation, and so, the never-ending cycle would continue; the newly forged souls would push forward after the unobtainable banners of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness', allowing just a little bit of themselves to be eaten away at a time as they allowed injustices to happen unto others just as long as it didn't interfere in their own pursuits, until, eventually, they succumbed to their own moral wounds and fell as one of the damned, wallowing in the meaningless curios their unregulated markets pushed, ground and torn apart under the slaving capitalism that they themselves ignorantly unleashed and deregulated to fulfill her whimpering promises of unbound wealth. Eventually, the scales would become imbalanced enough for the masses to rise up and protest, calling for justice once again, and, once again, the Morsons and Dents would hear their cries and rise up from their lowered circles, the mountains would shake and force the Postatas to fall from their rightful places, and the monsters would once again plow the fields and reset the cruel machine.

Justice. That was perhaps their cruelest joke. To invent such a righteous word, just to let it corrupt into a twisted manifestation that only served the men that wielded their rageful protests into a perpetual perversion of their reality.

That's what they got for believing that they could coexist with an ideology of absolutes, an ideology that can be summed up in one word – more. More souls to be converted and consumed by the suffering. More excess to satisfy their lustful hearts. More filler to pour into the growing void.

*There is no you,
there is only Me!
There is no you,
there is only Me!
There is no fucking you!
There is only Me!
There is no fucking you!
There is only Me!
Only! Only! Only! Only! Only! Only! Only! Only!*

Chapter 32

The car's deceleration prompted Sebastian awake from his dreamless suspension. When he opened his eyes, he saw the concrete pilons funneling the traffic off of I-10 and into the forgotten Arizona town that continued to serve as an interchange between the transcontinental artery and northern-flowing highways only known to the locals.

"Where are we?"

"Not sure. Haven't been paying attention."

Sebastian looked up and spotted one of the signs that should have served as a warning for Aaron miles ago,

Twenty more miles until 'The Thing'.

"Jesus Aaron, I told you to wake me up in Bowie, before we got to Wilcox."

"Sorry, I got focused on the driving. Is there a problem?"

"Not yet." Aaron didn't even bother looking away from the road while Sebastian looked around the back of the car and found the collection of candy bar wrappers and discarded energy drinks that Aaron had managed to accumulate in the few short hours that he was out. He looked at Aaron's eyes and found two tiny pupils darting around erratically in response to the stimulating lights passing by them. *Why the fuck does he always have to be on one of his stimulant runs just to be awake?*

Sebastian grabbed his phone from his backpack sitting behind Aaron and dialed one of his contacts.

"Hey, it's Dent. We're already here....Yeah, I passed out and my a-driver forgot to wake me up....You got it all taken care of?....Is it that important? We're kind of on a time crunch here....Well can you just tell me now?....All right, I'll see you in Tucson, my

place. Keep your phone on you; I'll give you a call if we run into any problems at the checkpoint."

Sebastian ended the call and stashed his phone away back into his pocket.

"What was that about?"

"We're on a toll road, but I took care of it. Just follow the directions and let me do the talking."

"Who's toll road?"

"That's not important now. We've almost got Postata home. No need to go all Morson here, just follow the path of least resistance."

The truck came to a crawl as they approached a makeshift checkpoint created from a series of concrete pilons and decomposing vehicles set up into a funneling 'V' in front of the Benson visitor center.

A sleepy-eyed rifleman stood up from his table while his three companions carried on with their idle intoxicating. He walked behind the truck and found the bright red line of tape and hopped up on the bumper to verify their cargo while Aaron covertly gripped his sidearm.

"Stop Aaron. Just let me talk. There's no need to escalate."

The man walked around to the driver window with a slight stumble in his step and heavy Spanish accent on his breath.

"You the Decimated on your way to bury your dead?"

"Yeah."

"Ok go ahead. Mr. Esquivel said to make sure that you know to stop by in Tucson."

"Yeah, I know. Headed there now."

The man waved them through without any more ceremony and returned to his dominoes game.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Toll road.”

“Who’s toll road?”

“Cartel. We’re paid up though.”

“So, it’s true? Decimated are working for the Cartel? You’re one of them?”

“Everything’s not as it appears, Aaron.”

“Well then how is it? Cause what it looked like to me was we just passed through a cartel checkpoint extorting tolls on American roads. You know what they’ve been doing in Texas, right? And you’re ok with that?” Aaron’s voice was whetted with an aggressive edge of judgement.

“Is it any worse than threatening a mortician over a lifeless corpse? Threatening his *American* family over some rotting meat without any remaining connection to this life?”

“Oh, so you think I’m the immoral one? You don’t want to honor Postata’s wishes?”

“I’m here, aren’t I? I’m just saying that you can’t sit there and judge from your ivory tower when you’re running around doing shit like that.”

“I’m honoring the wishes of a fellow Decimated. *Our Brother*. You’re helping psychopathic criminals bleed our country further. Those are not the same.”

“I’m honoring Postata’s wishes too, so drop the fucking tone, Aaron.”

“No! You’re working for them! How do you justify that?!”

“Look, D.C. snatched you right back up after the war and you got to go back to defending against America’s traditional enemies, but it’s not that black-and-white out here.”

Sebastian’s voice stonewalled against the accusatory tone.

“Some of us didn’t get to settle back into the comfortable lies of ‘family’ and ‘country’ after the war. Some of us are still trying to discover our meaning and it’s not as simple as American equals good, foreigner equals threat.”

“Oh yeah, I hear they pay pretty generously so it’s probably pretty easy to talk yourself into working for them.”

“Jesus, Aaron! Why do you always assume that it’s about money for the rest of us? I have enough money to last twenty lifetimes, let alone a single decade. Remember? Remember how you helped me murder my entire world and take their lifesavings before you fucked off back to Ohio to waste your spoils on the family that has never made any sacrifices for you?”

“So that’s what this is about? You’re still pissed about how things shook out, so you’re just going to abandon us and start working against your country?”

“Jesus! It’s not that fucking simple, Aaron! It was the fucking wild west out here! Your stupid government just abandoned all of these interior states because they were deemed no longer important enough to protect because of the mass exodus to the coasts. There was no one left to enforce the rule of law and the few people that remained were getting run out by banditry.”

“So, just because no one was out here, you think it was ok to help the cartels come in and set up shop? You know how much it’s going to cost us to drive them out when we’re back to rebuilding?”

“That’s exactly what we’re doing out here! Get the fuck off of your high horse, you self-righteous prick! Here’s a newsflash for you, China has a stranglehold on the world. Where do you think we’re going to get the raw materials for rebuilding? Where the fuck do you think America’s going to get all of the copper for infrastructure and electronics? The molybdenum needed to temper the drill pipe and casings in the oil fields? The silver and gold needed to reestablish the dollar’s value? The potash to fertilize our fields? The lithium for the electric batteries? Rare earths for the renewables? It all comes from the mines out here! New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, Utah! How do you expect the mines to operate if none of their workers are willing to come back? How do you expect to bring those miners back and keep them around if there’s no rule of law to protect what they’re working towards? Those cartels brought in stability because that’s good for their business and we let them operate toll roads because it helps pay for the stability necessary to keep operating out here.”

“You wouldn’t be defending them like this if you saw what they’re doing in Texas. If you saw how their product is tearing us apart back east.”

“I’m aware of what they’re doing and I haven’t seen anything any more violent than when I was with you.”

“That’s not the same. Our war was inevitable. We were responding to a threat to our country.”

“I’m still serving my country. Let’s just finish our trip and go our separate ways. You can go back to your simplistic worldview, and I’ll go back to being the enemy.”

Sebastian began to turn his headphones on and end the conversation but paused for one last instruction. “We’re stopping in Tucson. I gotta pick something up at my house.”

Chapter 33

Sebastian's contact was patiently standing outside waiting for him when Aaron slowly pulled into their driveway an hour before dawn. With the exception of the overgrown hedges and unattended lawn, it didn't look any worse for the wear. Before Aaron could even shift the truck into park, the man was already at Sebastian's window, eager to share his news. His face was handsomely unattractive, heavily influenced by his Moorish inheritance with pockmarked caramel skin that naturally complemented his thick raven hair; his eyes were moody, reminiscent of a searching raptor's, and deeply-set underneath unkempt thickets of eyebrows; his cheek bones, high and pronounced with tautly-drawn skin that coupled to his prominently-animated Adam's apple to accommodate his speech. His stature was wiry but proud.

"Hola, Sebastian!" The foreigner poked his head into the open window and offered a light fist-bump to his equals.

"I need to update you on some very concerning developments down south." The man looked Aaron up and down, "Tú confías en el?"

Sebastian turned his head to consider the possibilities, "No. Aaron wait out here. I'm going to talk to my friend here for a minute. I'll be back out in fifteen to twenty."

Aaron gave a quiet nod and reclined his seat back while Sebastian somberly got out and followed his contact inside.

"Sorry to keep you from your duties like this, but I'll keep it quick. I know this is a difficult day for you, and I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you." Sebastian's empty voice continued following the man deeper into his house. "What did you need from me?"

"It's not about what we need, my friend. It's about alarming developments that I believe concern both of us. I think your country's downward spiral is about to drag Mexico down into it and I was hoping you had some information to put our concerns to rest, or, at the very least, you would know someone trustworthy to get this information to."

"Well, tell me what it is and I'll see what I can do."

"I saw your friend Svetlana down in Mexico City. She was with several other Russians and she pretended to not remember who I was."

"I'm sorry for the disrespect Mr. Esquivel, but I haven't talked to Sveta in years."

"There's no need to apologize, she's not your concern, but you and I both know that she's fully aware of who I'm connected to and what I'm capable of, but she talked to me in a way that was very concerning, with a fearlessness like she believed she was untouchable. And her companions seemed to look down on me. It felt as though they believed that they were under someone's protection."

"You don't think the Russians are trying to move in on Cartel territory, do you?"

"No, I believe it's much worse. They haven't tried to make contact with us, no signs to warn us, no disruptions to any kind of our supply lines or distribution channels, no whispers from our people, no footprint at all. Yet, we hear a growing number of Russian voices around our smuggling ports and there are more and more manifests originating from Yakutsk. I think the Russians are plotting against your country and they are going to use Mexico as an invading point."

Sebastian rubbed his eyes and heaved a heavy sigh at the predictability of it all. He may not have seen the Russians becoming brazen enough to outright invade his country, but he

wasn't naïve enough to believe that the world would allow his country to rebuild. Domestic or foreign, someone was going to continue to punish her for her greed and he was just going to continue surviving and perpetuating the maelstroms.

"I believe you. Do you have any photographic evidence or shipping manifests for me to submit? Any idea of what kind of equipment or weapons they're smuggling in?"

"So, they are planning an invasion?"

"I don't know. There have been rumors floating around but all of our guys play everything real close to the chest so it's hard to verify anything. All I can do is send your information up the appropriate channels. You have any of that evidence for me to submit?"

"No. They are very secretive and the shipments are always under heavy guard. Nobody is uniformed, but we believe that they have Russian, Mexican, and American nationals working for them and they are too well trained and equipped for them to be hired muscle; and we don't want to go kicking up a hornet's nest connected to the Mexican government. What I can tell you, though, is that they have reserved seven warehouses at two of our Pacific ports that are capable of housing at least two thousand shipping containers."

"That's very useful information. Do you have any idea what their timeframe is?"

"I don't know where they are going or when they will act, but everything tells me that it will be soon. The tension has been growing in our air over the last three months and Miss Lermontova's fearlessness tells me that their plans are already in motion."

"I understand."

Sebastian pondered the information for a moment longer.

“Carlos?”

“Yeah?”

“If Russia does attack us, what side do you believe your people will take?”

“I believe that we’d take whichever side is best for our business.” He scratched his contemplating eyebrows as he clarified his position, “But the Mexican people harbor a lot of resentment towards how your country has treated us in the past, and, ultimately, the cartel is Mexican. Despite our savagery, we are going to have to take our peoples’ side. I think you can understand that.”

Sebastian gave a bemused scoff, “Yeah, I understand that. Thanks for the honesty.”

“I assume you would take your people’s side, too?”

Sebastian sighed, “I’m not even sure what side that would be. It’ll definitely be the losing side though.” Sebastian gave another defeated smile to conceal his dismay.

“Well, I hope that we don’t find ourselves on opposite sides, friend.”

Sebastian smiled, “Me either. I’m too tired to find new friends and you’re one of the only ones that understands all of this.”

“I feel the same. Let’s take comfort in the fact that we are friends today. Go and bury your brother and I will burn a candle for him.”

“I like that. Peace be with you.”

Carlos smiled at their common torment.

“And also with you, friend.”

Chapter 34

*Ready! Aim! Fire! Ready! Aim! Fire! Ready! Aim!
Fire! Detail, present arms!*

Sebastian was elated with the plot they had chosen for Alex. It was perfect. Tucked away under one of the giant cottonwoods that proudly shaded a portion of the little target range that sat on the backside of First Sergeant's Hill in the 2000-acre training area known fondly to the initiated as San Mateo's 'backyard'. Sebastian and Alex must have visited this spot over a hundred times during their hazings. It was where Sebastian had first found the spark of brotherhood that the dragon-slaying commercials had convinced him existed for every Marine.

Sebastian sank into one of his favorite memories as the bugler blew his mournful taps....

"They're going to wagon-wheel us at the BZO range and have us deploy guns so that they can catch their breath." Alex had already been in the fleet for a couple months by the time that Sebastian had been dropped to his unit and had taken it upon himself to show Sebastian all of the ropes.

"Non-rates down! Talking guns, now! Rapid fire!"

Alex continued his casual conversation with Sebastian as he snapped his M240 crew-served machine gun onto Sebastian's tripod, "Called it! Look at Tafoya sucking wind already over there. Go ahead and get the a-barrel out, Morales is going to take at least five minutes to catch up and catch his breath, so we're going to be running drills."

For the first eight months of his enlistment, Sebastian had known he had made a mistake and been sold a sour deal. The recruiters had prepared him to be hazed during his three-month-long boot camp until he earned his eagle, globe, and anchor, and could call himself a Marine. After that he'd be initiated and have his family of giants. But when he was sent to

his School of Infantry in Camp Geiger, his instructors had informed the fresh-faced high-and-tights that they still didn't rate; that they were just fourth-phase recruits with the only real difference now being their now legal obligation to finish out their enlistment contracts under threat of dishonorable discharge. That was a rude realization, but he'd rate once he hit the fleet. At least that's what the instructors told him when he'd rate medical treatment for his walking pneumonia as he spent his last three weeks of training huddled up in foxholes dug two feet into the water table that would freeze over at night.

"DIE MOTHERFUCKER, DIE MOTHERFUCKER DIE!" Alex yelled out his rapid-fire cadence to fill the gaps in with the other crew-served guns talking to him while Sebastian performed the team's continuous pushups.

Little had changed for Sebastian once he hit the fleet, save for the significant increase in sanctioned assaults. He had been promoted from fourth phase-recruit to non-rate, boot, or bitch depending on the senior Marine addressing him. His unit was still in the middle of sorting through a major personnel flux; outside of the staff NCO and officer ranks, his unit could be broken down into three generations, the Ramadi/Fallujah vets that had been on two of the three most hardcore OIF deployments back-to-back and were waiting to PCS over the next few months; the Okinawa vets who had come in after the combat vets and had the (un)fortunate luck of having their first deployment on the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and being sent to sit on navy ships and train in east Asian jungles while their seniors told them about real combat for seven months straight; and then the boots, who had the most unfortunate luck of having to absorb the brunt of the Okinawa vets' inferiority complex about not having that little combat action ribbon on their chest.

Most of the Ramadi vets had one foot out the door and would just show up to morning formations before heading out to San Onofre beach to surf their final days away. Their only current contribution to the unit being an overfilling of the barracks to a hundred and twenty percent capacity and forcing the incoming generation to take residence in the overflow housing known across the camp as the 'crackhouses'. A common misconception was that the crackhouses got that name for their state of disrepair – no working AC and no working fans to ventilate the putrid stench from the communal toilets that seemed to be perpetually clogged with the most foul excretions; broken window panes throughout that allowed free passage to the roaches coming and going to take drinks from the leaking communal showers and grab a snack from one of the trashcans overflowing with frozen dinner scraps and beer cans; or the doors that could neither close nor open all of the way. The common assumption was wrong, though, and their name was quite literal. The condemned structures were so far removed from battalion oversight that they became literal drug distribution centers for the more disenfranchised Marines that would try to cushion their transition into the civilian world by preparing a nest egg through the sales of heroine, pills, marijuana, and cocaine to other Marines seeking an escape from their nightmares.

This lack of oversight also made them prime hunting grounds for the Okinawa Marines trying to overcome the shame that came with never having been on a combat deployment like their predecessors. The Okinawa Marines would go on nightly binges of cheap domestic beer and Jack Daniels whiskey from the PX before frequenting the crackhouses to take out their impotent frustrations on the next generation. The blacked-out seniors would band together in predatory gangs of three to five that would rip out unconscious boots from their racks and beat them senseless for their incoherent crimes. The larger boots that could have put up a real fight were separated from the

herd and offered asylum in exchange for focusing their aggressions against their own generation.

The Okinawa seniors had tried to recruit Sebastian, but he could not bring himself to perpetuate the family dynamics that he had grown up with, instead trying for the path of peaceful coexistence. He should have known better though. His unspoken moral superiority just made them hate him even more and made him a prime target for their beatings until they had convinced him that his life was doomed to repeat the same lies over and over again unless he did something radically different, which he had decided to do.

Fully resolved, Sebastian had gone to the PX and bought an 8" KA-BAR blade to stash under his pillow. He was going to use it to gut every last insecure Okinawa Marine for daring to corrupt his dream.

But they never came for him that night. Instead, they had gone to black out in San Clemente with the final wave of Ramadi vets that were EAS-ing the following day. The next morning, Sebastian had been assigned his new roommate, Alex Postata.

"Postata! Dent! Barrel change!"

"WEAPON DOWN!" Sebastian thumbed the barrel latch and knocked the barrel's carrying handle upwards and out while Alex held the bolt to the rear. He grabbed its handle and slid it out to lay it down on its asbestos-fibered case before snatching up the cold barrel and snapping it down into place. Alex guided the bolt home, slammed down the feed tray cover to mimic his reload and imitated pulling the charging handle back and forward to send the weapon back to condition one.

"WEAPON UP! DIE MOTHERFUCKER DIE!" Their barrel change had taken less than eight seconds and wasn't even long enough for the other two guns to register a gap and cover their burst.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT DENT?!” Lance Corporal Tafoya was one of Sebastian’s most insecure seniors.

“A barrel change lance corporal. Corporal Ramirez called for one.” Dent didn’t even bother to look up from his pushups; he wouldn’t be able to mask his rageful hatred of the shitbag standing over him if he tried.

“I just watched you palm a hot barrel! How are you going to tug on that tiny little dick of yours if your skin is blistering off?!”

“No, I didn’t.” Sebastian hated how Tafoya would make shit up to try and skyline him so that he could flex his imaginary superiority over him. “I grabbed it by the carrying handle...the way I was trained to do.”

“I JUST WATCHED YOU GRAB A HOT BARREL! ARE YOU CALLING ME A LIAR?”

Sebastian didn’t bother to respond as Tafoya kicked up lungfuls of fine dust into his face. The Okinawa Marines never dared to fully assault the younger generation in broad daylight, especially not in front of any of the combat-hardened sergeants.

“AYE, AYE, *SENIOR LANCE CORPORAL*! SOME SHIT!”

Tafoya’s display had caught the attention of Corporal Ramirez and sent him to investigate.

“He grabbed it by the carrying handle *senior lance corporal*.” Alex had already been meritoriously promoted to lance corporal and loved adding a belligerent edge when addressing the Okinawa generation by their imaginary rank structure.

“What’s with all of the buttfuckery over here?” Corporal Ramirez asked his question with his semi-permanent smile slipping out; he was one of the few Okinawa Marines that couldn’t be bothered to take his duties seriously.

“Dent here just grabbed a hot barrel and Postata was volunteering to jerk him off while his blisters healed.”

“Is that true Postata? You gonna give Dent some tuggers and let him cream all over you?”

“No, that’s gross corporal! I’d just tug him off with my fleshlight.” Alex was one of the only boots that was untouchable. He had a perfect PFT, could out-hike anyone, out-shoot anyone, grapple anyone, knew every weapon system inside and out, and had memorized the guidebook and every instruction manual from cover to cover. He was Mr. Marine Corps. He was everything Sebastian had imagined.

Ramirez responded with a hearty chuckle, “That’s how you give your friends chlamydia!”

“Yeah, you fucking faggots!” Ramirez and Postata ignored Tafoya’s social ineptitude and opted to keep toying with him.

“How do get your friends off Tafoya? You just let them raw-dog that ass?”

“*That’s* how you get chlamydia!”

“Only if they creampie, corporal.” Even Sebastian couldn’t resist adding to Tafoya’s verbal tear down.

“Well, if Tafoya’s anything like his sister...”

“GOD FUCKING DAMN IT! I’m going to fuck you two up! GAS! GAS! GAS!”

“Worth it.” Sebastian giggled at Alex’s belligerent quipping as they freed their gas masks from off of their hips. “Tugging you off will always be worth it, brother.” Yep. Alex was Mr. Marine Corps and he had freely chosen Sebastian to be his brother. Sebastian smiled from under his mask as they dismantled their machine gun for transport.

“Yeah, not gonna be so smart in those masks.” Tafoya reveled in his pretentious authority, “Hey Corporal Ramirez, don’t they look good in their masks? Gonna take these two up First Sergeant’s Hill to fuck them up!”

Ramirez sauntered back over with his smile still glued to his face. “Those masks do look good! Hey Postata, you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Yeah! We make Tafoya’s sister wear one the next time we tag team her!”

Ramirez bust out laughing, “Exactly what I was thinking! Have fun hazing Tafoya!”

Sebastian’s smile melted into the taps’ final notes as his memories faded into the path leading up to First Sergeant’s Hill. The funeral detail’s leader commanded the working party standing by with their shovels to begin burying the shoddy coffin as he walked over to comfort the fallen’s family.

“Hey Dent, how are you?” The rows of medals clanged against the man’s hardened chest as he shot out his hand for a greeting.

“Hey Gunney, this was Postata’s spotter in the platoon, Aaron Morson.”

“Hey Morson, I remember you coming around the barracks with Postata and Dent. How are you?”

Aaron wrapped up the stocky Filipino in his signature hug. “Hey Ramirez, I remember you. Postata always had the funniest stories about you.”

“Yeah, we’re going to miss him.”

“Hey thanks for taking care of this for us.” Sebastian pointed to the grave before sending his hand out into an encompassing circle, “Alex would have loved this spot you picked out for him.”

“Of course! Once a Marine, always a Marine, right?”

“I wish that were true.” Sebastian sighed a heavy sigh, “But Postata kept the faith longer than any of us. If any of us deserved these honors it was him.”

Ramirez squeezed Sebastian’s shoulders, “I’m sure he’s hazing Tafoya wherever he is.”

Sebastian let out a tearful laugh, “Yeah that always was his favorite, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it was.” Ramirez wore his mournful smile well, “I’ll leave you two to say goodbye, but stop by the company office for a farewell toast, yeah?”

“You got it. Thanks Ramirez.”

Gunnery Sergeant Ramirez left to march his dress-blued detail out while Sebastian and Aaron watched the working party throw the final shovelfuls of dirt onto Alex’s grave. At the head stood an unassuming plate of white marble marking the site.

SGT A. POSTATA

1987-2023

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MOTY 2008

The working party had finished their task and cleared out for what seemed to be hours before either of them had dared to break the silence.

“He really was the best of us, wasn’t he?”

“Yeah, he was. Thanks for helping me get him out here.”

“He would’ve done the same.” Sebastian continued staring at the ground.

“Listen. About Tucson.”

“I don’t want to talk about it with you.”

"Sebastian, I was scared, ok? There are things developing in Texas and Mexico that are outside of your paygrade and the Decimated program is about to be reactivated and we were on our way to burying Alex and then I was blindsided by you working with the cartels, and I just don't know how I'm going to do all of this all over again by myself."

"What kind of developments? Russian developments?" Sebastian looked over at Aaron with a contemptuous look that screamed, *I told you so*.

"How did you know?"

"You don't listen. Things aren't all black-and-white out here."

"The cartel guy. What did he tell you?"

"Nothing I'm going to share with you."

"Sebastian, please, I'm on your side."

"Like I said, I just came along to make sure Alex made it home. We got him here, so let's go our separate ways."

"Sebastian, please just talk to me."

"You lost your chance to influence me when you gave me this," Sebastian sliced across his wounded neck, "and then just abandoned me. We're never going to be on the same side again."

Aaron lowered his head to arrest the fugitive tears. "Ok brother. I just want you to know that I love you."

"Yep Aaron, those are words." Sebastian shook his head and stormed off as he repeated his only sensical belief derived from a lifetime of false hope.

Everything is temporary. Pain is temporary. Family is temporary.

