

Life During Wartime

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I

Despite the fact that in the past three days I've witnessed at least 400 people die, I'm feeling extremely positive. I guess Lithium will do that for you.

"Sullivan, get your ass down!"

I do as ordered; you kind of have to in the Army. And now, crouched down, hiding behind what I'm guessing used to be a desk, I wait for all that to clear. Lord knows when it will actually happen, but I'm ok with the wait. It gives me time to think. And on this particular Saturday, January 5, 2030, I think back to why I am in this pickle of a situation.

The balance shifted on January 20th, 2025. After Harrison won... I mean, you know about all the fear-mongering, all the insanity, the bullshit that was thrown around during the campaign... Well, turns out, sometimes the craziest things said turn out to be the truest.

But that's not why I'm here. I could give a damn about the former United States of America. No, I'm not a spy for the Chinese, nor a saboteur of any design. I just think about the circumstances under which I was brought into Echo Squadron. Unfortunately, whilst remembering the crazy turn of events, to my left, something explodes.

"Sullivan! Get down!"

Sullivan. That's what they call me. That's what I respond to. That's what my tags say. I suppose that's who I am. Thanks to the Captain's orders, my new position shields me from the blast. Of course, the Chinese have different designs, as another bomb explodes. I'd say my superior armaments would keep me safe, but... Well, right below my barcode is a small imprint reading "Made in China"...

My ears have decided to take on a slap-echo; fitting, considering my vision has turned strobe lightesque, making it all play out like some sort of movie missing every other frame. Private Tolbert running. Blackness. Private Tolbert falling. Blackness. Private Tolbert dying. Blackness. The more I see, the more I believe this director has blatantly ripped off Saving Private Ryan. Bastard. But that's beside the point, the point being I think I got hit by something. Of course, it could be a bad cocktail of the MRE and the Chinese river water. Either way, I'm useless right now. Captain Sargent tells me to get somewhere safe. Ha, Cpt. Sargent. In the six months I've worked with him, I never thought of how funny his name is.

"Fall back! I repeat, fall back!" Sargent yells, before kneeling beside me. "Sullivan, can you walk?"

"Why not..." I say, trying to stand, "trying" being the key word. I quickly fall back. "Uh, I guess not, Cap." He shakes his bald head, and reaches over to the body of another member of the battalion, retrieving bandages, and a pair of tweezers. I think that guy was Paul Jones. I can't tell, though, his faces being gone and all. While I ponder the people who are eventually going to have to clean up this mess, Sarge goes to work on my leg. Shrapnel. Lots of it.

"Goddammit, Sully..." Sarge says.

I don't think he was really mad at me; I think he was mad at my leg and the shrapnel. But then again, he would have sounded ridiculous had he said "Goddammit, Sully's leg and the shrapnel within..." And with a name like Captain Charles Sargent, you can't afford to be made a fool.

In a record one minute, 34 seconds, my wound is dressed, a splint on either side. Sargent lends me support on my left side as I'm made to stand. He hands me his side arm.

"You see anything move, shoot it. I'll get us out of here," He says, confidently, popping a piece of gum into his mouth. I hope this crazy bastard isn't lying to me.

II

In a hallway in a house on 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Steve Jacobs walks with a slow gate. At the end of this hallway is a room where a man sits in a leather chair, eyeing a fireplace, crackling orange.

Before Steve has a chance to say anything, he stops and stares at the man in the chair. He remembers a short four years ago, when the man was more than a man: a beacon, a symbol of hope to come after years of corruption and greed. A good, decent man. He went to church every Sunday. He helped those in need.

He bestowed in his children a sense of pride in their country, a sense of dignity in the face of adversity, a sense of hope in the darkest of hours.

But that man no longer sits in the chair. No, now he is an empty shell, a wrapper of a prize long discarded. His eyes, once an alarming brown have turned dull, sunken and empty. The full head of thick brown hair was now a sea of thinning grey. In his left hand, a cigarette burned slowly; a cigarette that hadn't been there for 10 years. And he just gazed upon the dying fire, watching its lustrous wild flames turn to embers. Steve Jacobs breathes in to speak, but can't muster the words necessary.

"Hello, Steve," the man says, breaking the cold silence.

"Mr. President..."

"I know, Steve. I have a television,"

"We're sorry, sir."

"Can't win 'em all, can ya?"

"No, I guess not."

"Sit down, Steve. Have a drink with me," He insists.

The President walks to his desk, retrieving a crystal bottle, and two glasses. After pouring, he hands one off, and resumes his position. Steve Jacobs sits as he was asked. Saying nothing, he looks at the glass in his hand, and waits. Finally, the silence is broken.

"What did we do wrong, Steve?"

He looks at the other chair, eyes wide.

"I... I don't know, sir."

"Nor do I."

The President takes a strong swallow, before continuing.

"This country is effectively over. Nothing will be the same again," He says, finishing his drink. "The dreams we had, the dreams of our forefathers... of our children, gone."

Steve Jacobs has been sober for three years. And now, as he looks at the man in front of him, the man of vision and hope broken to pieces, he takes a sip. High-end scotch. Before he has a chance to meet the demon inside of him, the phone rings.

"Sir, that will be Senate- President-Elect Harrison," Steve says.

"I know."

He sits, and lets it ring.

"Sir, I-"

"Don't, Steve. Not now."

Steve Jacobs puts the glass down, and stands.

"Sir, it's in poor taste. Please answer the phone."

"Let me ask you something, Steve. Who do you blame in a situation like this?"

Steve Jacobs stands quiet for a moment before the continuing ring of the phone forces his hand.

"Sir, I understand how you must be feeling, but please, answer the phone."

"Do you blame the people, the public, waiting to hear something different, no matter what it is? Or do you blame the man who told them that something?"

"Al, come on. You're acting like a child."

"But neither of those are the answer, Steve. The answer is yourself, or me, rather. Lord knows we made mistakes. But they were the choices that had to be made, the choices they chose us to make."

"Al, it's a three minute conversation, please."

"Ya know, I almost think the office of President was designed as a cruel joke. Imagine, General George Washington, a war hero, coming home after battle, and being awarded the title of President... beginning the longest running practical joke of all time."

He takes a drag of the cigarette, before continuing.

"We're set up for failure, Steve. As human beings, we're savage creatures. Despite years of putting ourselves above the wolves, we always revert to what we truly are. And when the leader can't provide exactly what the pack wants, he is cast aside, whether it was right or wrong... The public wants what the public wants."

The man sits, eyeing the fire in the wall, retrieving the glass Steve Jacobs sat down, consuming its contents.

"President Harris, you're live in 15 minutes," an aid announces from the doorway.

"Thanks, Greg, he'll be out in a moment," Steve Jacobs says, not sure if he just lied to the young man.

"Come on, Al. Let's get out there, I've got your speech right here."

The President takes the paper, and glances over it.

"Thank you, Steve. That will be all."

Steve Jacobs walks to the doorway, before turning around.

"We'll be in the Rose Garden, Al."

Steve Jacobs watches the man wave him away. He shuts the doors, and starts his long walk to the outside.

But before he can reach the final door, there is a single gunshot.

The next morning, the headline read "President Alvin Patrick, May 5, 1979-November 5th, 2024"

III

Standing in the elevator alone is never fun. This problem, of course, is exacerbated when you're on your way to the top floor of a newspaper office on your day off to get your ass reamed for taking a photograph in an area you're not allowed to take photographs in a certain building in D.C..

"You stupid, dumb ass, mother fucker..."

My inner monologue uses colorful language when upset. And upset it is. I wondered what I could have done differently. Maybe the picture was too graphic. Granted, I didn't have much time to set it up, get proper lighting, frame the shot in any way, but then again, maybe I could have. Maybe the caption shouldn't have said "President Alvin Patrick murdered?" So many other ways I could have phrased that. But, then again, it was a stop the presses moment and I had to think on my feet. No, I did everything I could. Didn't I? Yeah. Yeah, I did. And besides, even if I didn't, it's not like I can change them now.

"Logan, get your ass in here right now, goddammit!"

Editor-At-Large Glenn Liebowitz. He's not happy. This will be fun.

As I walk by the watering hole, I kill my inner-monologue. Unfortunately, the vibrant conversation that was happening dies as I walk by. Too bad. Eavesdropping is a sort of hobby of mine. And that hobby maybe just cost me a job. Into the office.

"Logan..." Glenn says, throwing the paper at the desk. "You realize this is a problem."

"No, it's journalism. Eye-witness journalism."

"Gonzo-Journalism, Eli. Yellow-Journalism. William Randolph Hearst-Journalism. Muck-raking. Sensationalism," He spits back at me. "How..."

"I was at the press conference," I say. "And it was taking awhile to start, so I meandered off. I made it to what I thought was the bathroom. And then I opened the door. There he was. And I shot the photo."

"So, let me get this straight... You meandered around the most heavily guarded building on the planet, which led you to a door, which, despite the lack of any sign indicating it to be a restroom, you opened with full intention of relieving yourself?"

"Yeah, I did. There didn't seem to be anyone around, so I figured it was alright to look around."

Glenn puts his left hand to his temple, and pops an aspirin.

"My phone has not stopped ringing, Elliott. For the past 13 hours, I have not had a moment of silence."

"Glenn, I'm sorry, but is this not what the paper is for?"

"Fear-mongering?"

"Information. Knowledge."

"It's one thing to question causality, and another to take sides, Eli. You've... Elliott, you are about to become a very important person."

"I just did my job, chief," I say, trying to hide the sweat on my forehead.

"Ha... Yes, you did. You did a fine job."

He stares out of his window. I swallow hard.

"You're fired, Eli. I'm sorry."

V

Our battalion is dead. All that's left are Cpt. Sargent and me, Pvt. First Class Sullivan. Not that they know that. Nor do we know that.

"Jerky, Sully?"

Sarge extends a Ziploc bag to me, filled with dried meat. I take a piece.

"Well, what do we do now?" I ask him before biting down onto the hickory flavored leather in my hands.

Sarge pops another piece of gum into his mouth.

"Well, I don't know, Private. I suppose right now, we get some rest, and make plans tomorrow, while we're still presumed dead," He said, laying back onto a rock, looking at the stars.

"Right. Does your radio work?"

"Nope. Yours?"

I tried to turn it on. Nothing.

"No mas," I say, tearing another bit of jerky off and chewing it.

"Beautiful, Sullivan. Just beautiful."

"Should one of us stay awake as look-out?"

"Sully, if they're coming for us, there will be more of them than you can count, with weapons. I doubt one and a half soldier's really going to make a difference if they converge. Just go to sleep, and I'll wake you in the morning."

I look at him, considering a question about his jerky, but it eludes me as the painkillers take me easily into dreamland, and the same dream I've had every night since a gunshot killed two people on 1600 Pennsylvania Ave, in Washington D.C., November 5th, 2024.

TWO

I

"Rise and shine, Sullivan," a gruff voice says. Why I identify him as a gruff voice, I don't know. It could be no one but Sarge. So, Sarge says, in a gruff voice.

"Morning," I say, sitting up and yawning.

"We've got some ground to cover today, Sully."

"Hoo-Ha, Sargent," I say, slowly trying to put weight on my leg.

"Slow down, kid," Sarge says, walking over to me, and helping me up. "Now, on the count of three, I'm going to let go of you. If you can stand, stand. If you can't, don't. Now, one, two..."

I braced myself for the failure, sure that my leg would not support my slim 174 pounds.

"Three," he said, letting me go. I collapsed immediately.

Sarge just stares at me on the ground.

"Well, shit."

II

"Ladies and Gentleman, we are standing outside of the headquarters of The Washington Post, awaiting comment from Glenn Liebowitz, Editor-At-Large, on reporter Elliott Logan. Logan was an attending reporter at what was expected to be the concession speech of President Alvin Patrick. What transpired, instead, was the death of the recently defeated President. Wait, I'm just receiving word that Liebowitz is- There he is! Mr. Liebowitz, do you have a statement?"

"You know how this game works, Mrs. Jiminez," Glenn says, walking past the reporter in the red pant suit. I just stayed in the back, sunglasses on, hood up. As much as I'd like to say I'm planning to storm the office, set it ablaze for injustice, the truth is, I just forgot my laptop. Unfortunately, I'm more or less a wanted man right now. Fortunately, the jackals are no match for my cunning and masterful disguise.

Upstairs, the night shift is taking over. Reporters putting the finishing touches on their stories, editors working on last minute layouts, and photographers touching up pictures they're afraid will "make the fat man look fat." I sneak in, and head to my desk.

The laptop is in its bag under the desk, right where I left it. I quickly scan the area for anything else I might have missed, and say a silent goodbye to my desk before standing. I put my hood back up, and walk to the door. Over the frame is a staff photograph taken three years ago. I'm on the second row on the right, press pass around my neck. Ridiculous hair. We all make mistakes in college. I open the door, and turn to the elevator.

One thing I won't miss about this place is this elevator. Five stories, and it takes a week to get the elevator anywhere. It might be faster to walk, but, as with the rest of my generation, I'm incredibly lazy when given the chance. Something gets in my eye, so I remove my sunglasses to deal with it. Suddenly, there's a flash. I look left.

"Hello, Elliott."

III

Sarge and I have been walking for about four hours. Well, Sarge has been walking. I've been hobbling along. And despite what anyone may have told you, the Chinese country side... beautiful. Had this have occurred 12 years ago, I would have stopped, taken a photograph, added it to the collection. But no, today, I'm standing here on one leg, trying to keep up with a man twice my age in better shape than I could ever think of being.

"Ya know, this is not a bad view, Sarge," I say, breathing in that sweet Chinese air.

"I know. I saw it five years ago," He said.

"What were you doing here five years ago?"

"Sully, I'll tell you all about my life when we're sitting at a bar with a couple beers. As for now, we need to locate some friends, or else."

I took 'or else' to mean no one would come to our birthday party initially, but that was probably the weapons grade pain killers I was on at the moment. I shook off the thought.

"So, what're we supposed to talk about, then?"

"How about nothing?" Sarge suggested, reaching for a piece of gum.

"We're in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do but walk. A little idle conversation might pass the time."

"Sullivan, enough. I don't talk about my past. I don't like to. Just leave it at that."

"We don't have to talk about our pasts. We can talk about anything. I just hate silence."

"I'm getting that," He said, popping the gum. "I, on the other hand, live for it."

Insight into the man. I'm wearing him down.

Though not enough to actually get anything out of him. The following three hours were full of me asking pointless questions, and Sarge chewing gum more furiously the longer I spoke. After awhile, we found ourselves perched on the outside of a small village, looking down from the top of a hill.

"Well, Sully, we have a few options: one, we walk into the village, and pray we find one of those families from a war movie who will sympathize with our cause, as you're injured, or two, we kidnap a child, and hold him hostage until they cave to our demands. What do you say?"

"Well, the hostage situation sounds more exciting and action packed... And I have always dreamed of putting a gun to a small Asian child's head... But we might be better off just bypassing the whole place, and looking for an outpost," I said, trying my expert logic out.

"That's a perfectly logical idea, except for one thing."

Sarge held his bag upside down, and onto the ground fell three clips for a sidearm, and a pack of cigarettes with a post-it note attached reading 'emergency'.

"What happened to all your rations?"

"I've always had the medic carry them for me. Makes me lighter on my feet. Unfortunately, he transformed from one man to a thousand little pieces."

"Witchcraft, I say."

"When you finally get that job writing internet comedy, e-mail me the address."

"Is your e-mail still IHateFun@army.com?"

Sarge shot me a look of disgust. Someone once joked that if the Army intended for Sarge to have a sense of humor, they would have issued him one. A lame joke adapted from a terrible line in a terrible Damon Wayans movie, granted, but the truth nonetheless.

"Look Sarge, we need-," I started, before Sarge tackled me into the small shrubbery (Though big enough to obscure us both from vision) conveniently located behind me. The pain in my leg was excruciating at our combined weight smashing down upon it, but if there was one thing I learned in Basic, it's that when a superior officer tackles you, it's a good idea to stay quiet, so I held my tongue. Well, I bit my tongue, which I guess is technically holding it with my teeth... So yeah, I held my tongue. But I digress. Sarge whispered into my ear, lovingly.

"If you say a fucking word, Sullivan, I will-," Sarge started before he was interrupted by the barrel of a rifle.

I put my hands in the air, as Sarge stood, pulling me up beside him.

"Hola," The gentleman wielding the rifle greeted us.

Sarge propped me up on a tree. I want to say it was a banzai tree, but I think those are Japanese, and from what I'm told, the two countries don't like to be confused. Rather than waste precious energy on the query, I just resigned myself to the fact that we stood in China as Americans at gunpoint by either a Spaniard or a Mexican. The pain receptors in my brain were overloading on signals, and things were going red. And as is my custom, I decided to speak up.

"No hablas Espanol."

The gentleman with the gun cocked his head to the side, before removing the scarf-like cover on his head, still holding the gun to us.

"haha..." He chuckled. "This what passes for a soldier lately, Chuck?"

"Madison?" Sarge asked, lowering his hands.

"In the flesh, Sergeant," He responded as he lowered the gun.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

The gentleman, whose name was apparently Madison (Whether it was his first or surname eluded me) kicked the gun clips around and picked up the cigarettes.

"I thought you quit Sergeant?"

"It's Captain now, and yes, I did, hence the post-it."

"Emergency. So being stranded in hostile territory without your squadron doesn't count as an emergency?"

"I didn't have a light."

"Well, fortunately for me, I do, and I just ran out."

Madison lit a cigarette.

"Ooh... Cowboy killers," He commented. "I do appreciate it. And to answer your question, I'm here for the same reason you are, Captain."

"You were deployed to spread democracy to a global threat?"

"No, I was paid handsomely to assassinate a certain Chinese official. Hey, is he gonna be alright?"

Madison pointed in my direction, where my leg was once again bleeding, and I was wobbling on the tree.

"Sullivan, how ya doin'?"

"Hoo-ha, Sargent," I said, before I fell to the ground in shock. Before I completely blacked out, I heard uncontrollable laughter.

"Throw him in the back of the truck, and make sure he doesn't bleed on anything."

IV

"Can we offer you anything, Mr. Jacobs? Coffee, water?"

Steve Jacobs sits in his chair, silent, as he has for the past week.

"Mr. Jacobs... Steve, come on," The gentleman across the table says.

Silence. Nothing but silence.

"Steve. We're trying to help you here. But we can't help you unless we get something out of you. What you saw, what you heard, what you smelled... Anything."

Steve Jacobs sat in a comatose state, only evidence of his survival his low breathing.

"Alright. Take him back to his cell."

Two guards do so. They put handcuffs on Steve Jacobs, and lead him out of the building, where a crowd of journalists wait, talking to cameras, filling the void in the 24 hour news networks 5 A.M. block. Once the doors open, deafening noise. Every sentence fell together.

"...u have a statement?"

"...were you with the Pres..."

"...y'd you do it, Mr. Jac..."

"...icide, Mr. Jacobs..."

"...acobs, where were..."

"...Secret Service..."

"...conspiracy against the..."

Steve Jacobs walked, comatose with the two officers on his sides. What only took 20 seconds seemed like an eternity to Steve Jacobs. He looked out of the window, into the eyes of the reporters, as the driver began the drive to the holding cell Steve Jacobs had been staying in for the past three weeks.

"Woof..." The driver said. "They've got your number, kid."

Steve looked toward the rear-view mirror, hoping to catch the drivers eye. When he didn't look, Steve Jacobs allowed his eyes to glaze over, and hopefully slip into a trance. But there was a ring. The driver reached down, and answered the car phone.

"Hello? Yeah, he's in transit to- What do you mean? On whose- Oh... R-right, I'll get him there."

The driver put the phone down, before violently changing lanes. The officers to Steve sides seemed confused.

"What are you doing?" one asked.

"Destination has changed. I'm to take you to this address," The driver said, holding up a small piece of paper.

"On whose authority?"

"President-Elect Harrison."

"I'm going to have to call this in," the other officer said.

The car suddenly stopped.

"No, you're not," The driver said, as the two back doors opened to reveal four men holding guns at the officers.

"What are you-"

Steve Jacobs imagined the rest of the sentence was the word 'doing,' though he could never be sure, as the two officers were now deceased. The doors closed, and it was just Steve Jacobs and the Driver. Under normal circumstances, Steve Jacobs would have been sweating profusely, his heart beating faster than normal, and perhaps his hands trembling. But the past three weeks had been anything but normal circumstances. So, calmly, Steve Jacobs broke his three week silence.

"Where are you taking me?"

The Driver looked in his rear-view mirror, and smiled.

"Well, look who remembered how to talk..."

Steve Jacobs sat calmly.

VI

I imagine my face looked ridiculous much longer than is necessary in a situation such as this. Perhaps with the shocked expression, coupled with my masterful disguise, she'd think she made a mistake and be on her merry way.

"Elliott Logan speechless. Now, there's something new," She said, smiling coyly.

No dice. I knew I needed a moustache to really bring the ensemble together. I accepted defeat and spoke.

"Ida. Hi. How are you?"

"Can't complain. Just getting some work done."

"I think you came to the wrong building. You haven't worked here in-"

"Three years," She said, the smile fading.

"Really, has it been that long? Seems like only yesterday we were..." I trailed off, realizing in mid-sentence bringing up the reason she left could potentially end the same way it did last time. And I just can't afford a new car right now, in this economy.

"Wanna go somewhere? Get some coffee?" She asked.

"I'm a little preoccupied at the moment. I, uh, am... Busy."

"That's too bad. Well, I guess I'll go, then. My car's parked out back. Ya know, where there aren't any reporters or anything... Say, why are they here, anyway?"

She's still cute when she asks a rhetorical question.

"Out back, huh? Ya know, on second thought... I could use a cup of coffee."

"I thought you could. Right this way, Mr. Logan."

I followed her out the familiar back dock, where a shitty 1992 Honda was sitting.

"Looks like they're paying you well at the dirt sheets," I said.

"Oh, if you'd rather, we can go up front, and you can drive."

I smiled, and pulled on the door handle. It promptly came off the car.

"Uh, I..."

She rolled her eyes, and opened the door from inside.

"Sorry."

"A little late for that, Eli."

"Maybe. So, where're we going?"

"To get some coffee, dear."

As she started the car, a cloud of that real expensive black smoke poured out of her exhaust pipe. I thought of Al Gore shitting himself at this sight, and smiled. We pulled away, as she lit a cigarette. As she blew the smoke at my face, memories took over my brain. This might have been a mistake.

THREE

I

"Mind if I throw some music on?"

Steve Jacobs stares into the eyes in the mirror, not saying anything.

"Ok, well, I'm gonna go ahead and put this on," The Driver says.

The song is calm. Jazz, big band of some sort. Steve Jacobs has heard this song before. "My Funny Valentine," Sinatra's version. He looks out the window as the vocals begin.

"Why were those men killed?" Steve asks.

"If I knew, you would know. Honestly, I was worried I was on their agenda," The Driver says.

"Where is this meeting happening?"

"Some warehouse down by the river. Classy, right?"

"And I'm speaking with Harrison?"

"Uh, no, not exactly. You're actually meeting with..." He trails off as he reaches into an envelope. "Here we go, Dr. Jonathan Fathers."

"The scientist?"

"That's the guy."

"Why?"

"Once again, if I knew, I'd tell you."

"Well, what do you know?"

"I know that I was hired to drive you to your next destination."

"Anything else?"

"No. I was paid as a driver. Well, I guess I was also given this envelope which was to be opened only under the circumstance that I receive a phone call giving explicit instructions to do so."

"Great."

"Hey, it could be worse, buddy."

Steve Jacobs moved his eyes to meet the eyes in the mirror.

"Think about it, Mr. Jacobs."

The Driver turned the music up, realizing he wasn't going to get anymore out of Steve Jacobs. The song ended, and transitioned to the next. Steve Jacobs has also heard this one before as well. Pink Floyd, Run Like Hell.

"If only," he thinks to himself.

II

I've spent the latter half of the past hour silently listening to Ida's music, trying not to breathe in the second-hand smoke. I bought the woman an electric cigarette years ago, yet she would never use it. Her philosophy was something akin to "If I'm going to die of lung cancer, so will everyone else around me." At least that's how I interpreted it.

The silence between us was thick. Understandably so, considering our last conversation was a good five years ago, which ended in smeared make-up and a wedding cake just for her. Despite this weighing heavily on my mind, I decided to try.

"So, how're things at-"

"I don't work there anymore. Got a better offer from The Enquirer."

"When did that-"

"About a year ago. Mostly celebrity gossip, you know, stuff that sells."

"That's funny, coming from the girl who told me to stop covering rock bands and start writing about politics."

"Hey, nobody's perfect, Mr. Logan," she said with a vicious glare.

I shrank into my seat, as she turned her focus back to driving, where the silence took hold again. I looked out the window, admiring the slums of D.C. and the clientele they catered to. Astonishing to think a mere 20 years ago, this was one of the more affluent neighborhoods. I had the thought to ask her where exactly it was we were going, but figured time would answer such questions for me. And since conversation was tentative at best between us, I decided now would be a good time to sleep. Ida had other ideas.

"So, since we still have a ways to go, how about a little reading material?" she said, simultaneously driving and digging through the folders in her attaché case.

"What kind of reading material?"

"Just a little story I'm working on."

"What's it about?"

"Life During Wartime."

"The Talking Heads song?"

"No, the way life is about to change dramatically in these United States of America."

"That's cute, but we're not exactly at war, darling."

"Not yet. But we will be."

"How do you figure?"

"Certain events have recently transpired that lead me to believe a war is coming. Take a look at my research."

She finally found the folder she was looking for, and handed it to me. I opened it to find but one photograph. My photograph. The shot heard around the globe.

I picked it up, and admired it.

"You might want to check your sources. I've heard this might have been doctored before it was run."
She smirked.

"Considering the photographer has let me down but once, I'll go ahead and trust him for now."
I smiled, as she pulled into a parking lot. I looked around to see where we were. Motel 6. Classy.

"So, Ms. Sinclair, might I ask why we're at the Motel 6?"

"Well, you need somewhere to stay for the time being. Motel 6 takes cash."

"Oh..."

"Room 27. Here's the key. I'll be back at seven. Don't leave, don't talk to anybody, your lunch will be here in about an hour."

"You work fast, ma'am."

"Just how you like it, if I remember correctly."

"So, what're we doing at seven?"

"Having dinner, catching up on old times. And then we get down to business."

I raised an eyebrow.

"And you know that's what I meant, too, Eli. Get in there."

I got out of the car, and grabbed my bag. She rolled the window down.

"Eli," she said.

"Yeah?"

"You're an idiot, by the way."

At that, she drove away. God, I love that woman.

III

"Great," I thought to myself. "I'm fucking dead. That's really gonna help me get out of debt."

I opened my eyes to the utter blackness around me. I didn't like it. Nope, not one bit. Don't misinterpret, I'm not afraid of the dark. I'm just... I'm just made uncomfortable by the absence of light. I'm made uncomfortable by what might not be there. I hope that makes sense. But what does it matter? I'm dead right?

Click.

On came a dim light bulb hanging from the center of this little shack. Despite the low wattage, I was blinded for a second, meaning I couldn't make out who the footsteps approaching me belonged to.

"Buenos Noches, Sullivan," the, well, I guess I'll identify them as boots am I'm not really sure who the voice belonged to. So, the boots said.

"Mi yamo Sullivan?" I said. Despite prior statements to the contrary, I could speak some busted up Spanish if the situation called for it.

The boots laughed, as my vision slowly adjusted.

"Sully, how ya feelin'?" The familiar growl asked.

"Been better, Sarge."

"Yeah, well, Madison's men have graciously extended their hospitality to us for the time being. And as such, you should be up and running in no time."

"Wonderful. Where are we?"

"Shanghai."

"Wonderful. And I'll guess you're Madison, then?" I asked, shifting my focus to the man in the bandanna.

"Sharp kid, Chuck. Yeah, I'm Madison. Call me John."

"Oh, cool. Like the president," I said.

I received cold glares from the both of them, before Madison turned to Sarge.

"I take back the comment about him being sharp, Chuck."

"I figured you would," Sarge said. "Sully, we're getting picked up in three days, and taken back home. So, until then, try not to be an idiot."

"I'll do my best, Sarge, but you know me; I ain't right."

"Yeah, we know. Ground rules are as follows: these fine gentleman are a privately operated task force, so we have no power here. We are civilians. We act like civilians. Anything that looks important, you don't go near. It shouldn't be hard, as you're stuck in this shack until tomorrow, but beyond that, just use your brain."

"There's food coming for you in about 20 minutes. Eat up. This ain't the Army, kid," Madison said. "As for now, I've got work to do. You boys enjoy our little establishment."

Madison left, and it was just Sarge and Sully, like the good old days.

"You play poker, Sully?" Sarge asked.

"Is that anything like Go Fish? Because I'm pretty good at that."

Sarge shook his head.

"Of all the soldiers in the squad, you had to be the invincible one..."

"Shocking, huh?"

"Baffling."

He pulled his deck from his pocket, and distributed cards.

"Got any 10s?" he asked.

"Go Fish."

IV

Steve Jacobs sat quietly when the car finally pulled to a stop.

"We're here," The Driver said.

Steve Jacobs looked to the building he had been brought to. An abandoned warehouse. Steve Jacobs looked to The Driver.

"Where do I go?"

"Uh, this building right here... Ah, there's your door. Just walk right in."

"Doesn't seem very secure."

"Trust me, looks can be deceiving. You'd better hurry along, Mr. J. I understand Doc Fathers is a busy man."

"I can imagine."

Steve Jacobs exited the car he had been in for the past hour, and walked to the door. He reached for the door knob.

"Oh, hey, Mr. Jacobs. Here," The Driver said from the car, holding a briefcase.

"What?"

"You need to deliver this to him."

"What is it?"

"Don't know. Could be his dry cleaning for all I care. I'm washing my hands of this ordeal after you take this case."

Steve Jacobs wished his role in this was that simple. He wished he could just drive a car around all day, and at leave anything to do with work in that car. But he couldn't; not now, not ever. He took the briefcase.

"Good luck in there, Mr. J," The Driver said, as he pulled away.

Steve held the briefcase. It was remarkably heavy for its size, and the locks were different from any he had seen before. He thought to investigate further, but was stopped by the door to the building opening.

"Right this way, Mr. Jacobs," A man in a black suit said.

Steve Jacobs complied.

Inside, fluorescent lights gave the room a green hue. He didn't like the color; it made him sick. He powered through the green haze after the man, until they reached a door.

"Dr. Fathers will be in shortly," he said, opening the door, gesturing for Steve to enter. "Please, make yourself comfortable until then."

He entered the room. Somehow, in this barren, green warehouse, there was a room inside, an office. A spacious office, with a window view, showing green trees before a thriving cityscape. Steve's initial thought was that it was a computer screen, a movie of some sort. But as he approached it, the sheer depth of the view removed that option completely. He sat the briefcase down, and walked toward the window. This wasn't a movie. This was real. He opened the window. A breeze of fresh air rushed through the opening.

Steve Jacobs was confused.

"It's really something, isn't it?"

Steve turned around to see a man. Dressed casually in a corduroy jacket and jeans, his long gray hair was tied into a pony-tail. A pair of black horn-rimmed glasses sat on his nose, and a well groomed beard covered his face. He smiled, had a very paternal aura about him. Steve Jacobs suddenly felt very at ease.

"Oh, it's alright, Mr. Jacobs, feel free to look. Stick your hand out the window," the man said.

Steve Jacobs complied. Within seconds, a light rain started to pour on his hand.

"Amazing? Mind-boggling? All of the above? Maybe," he said. "Oh, how rude of me. I'm Dr. Jonathan Fathers."

He extended his hand to Steve, how quickly returned the gesture.

"Steve Jacobs."

"Yes, I'm quite familiar with you Mr. Jacobs. A bit popular these days, huh?"

"I guess... How-"

"All in due time, Steve. For now, I'd just like to have a chat with you. Can I offer you anything? Coffee? Water? Something a little stronger to take the edge off?"

"I, uh..."

"Say no more. Here."

He walked to the desk and opened the bottom right drawer, where he removed a crystal bottle, and two glasses. After pouring, he hands one off. Steve takes a sip. High-end scotch. Steve drops his glass.

"Something wrong, Mr. Jacobs?"

"This is..."

"Familiar?"

"How did you..."

"Steve, I'd like it very much if you would have a seat, and listen for awhile. Tell me, do you play chess?"

Steve nods.

"Fantastic. Nothing stimulates a conversation quite like a good game of chess."

Dr. Fathers set up the chess board, as Steve picked his spilled glass up. Once he was done, Dr. Fathers took the glass from him.

"Another, Mr. Jacobs?"

Steve reached into his pocket, where the token, validating his achievements towards sobriety, was always kept, reaching to it for strength. But it was gone. And so to was the needed strength, the physical representation of his work. Steve Jacobs had lost the lock to the cage holding the monster back.

"Yes. Please. Two-fingers, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. If you would like, you may begin the game."

V

Ida had to pick the one motel on the planet Earth that doesn't have cable or wireless internet.

Understandable, given this place probably also features rooms you can purchase by the hour. Oh well, at least dinner will be around soon. And until then, PBS.

"And now, we continue our presentation of Much Ado About Nothing on Masterpiece Theater."

Hurrah.

VI

It turns out Sarge is a poor loser. Our happy-go-lucky game of Go Fish quickly deteriorated into threats on my manhood once it was evident I was to be the victor. Luckily before any said threat was carried out, Madison showed up with dinner for me, and news I apparently wasn't privy to. He and Sarge stood outside as I gorged on some sort of Salisbury Steak. Not bad. A little saltier than I like my processed steak, but who am I to complain? Before I could properly judge the mashed potatoes, the door opened. In walked Madison, sans Sarge.

"How ya like the grub, kid?" he asked.

"Can't complain."

"Good. Well, tomorrow morning, we're packing up and relocating. Our location has been compromised."

"Oh, fun."

"I know. Three months of planning down the tube. Oh well, could be worse. Anyway, we're gonna send the medic in tonight to get you up and running again."

"Anything I can do to help."

"Probably not necessary, but appreciated. You want some dessert?"

"Sure."

Madison nodded and headed out the door. Immediately after, Sarge came back in.

"Try not to smile so much, it's weird."

Sarge looked at me, and shook his head. He picked up his tray of food, and squatted in the corner, picking at its contents.

"So, we're moving tomorrow, huh?"

Still nothing from the bald man in charge of my well-being as he made short work of his steak. I tried to figure out what was wrong without directly asking, as Sarge wasn't much for talking about his problems. Unfortunately, his poker face was something of legend.

"Sarge, I-"

"We have a problem, Sullivan."

"Yeah, I know. These green beans are chewy, but I don't want to complain."

"Culinary critiques aside, there's an issue. Before night's-"
Sarge was interrupted by the door opening, and Madison entering the room.

"Cake?" Madison asked, with a strange look on his face.

"John, you doin' alright?" Sarge asked, standing up.

"Ha, never better, Chuck."

He leaned against the doorframe.

"Madison, what's..."

Sarge's eyes got wide as Madison fell to the ground, dead. Sarge quickly charged and flipped the bed, pulling me behind it with him. Everything around us quickly exploded. I guess cake wasn't happening.

VII

Ida had finally shown back up; right in the nick of time, too, as the television was about to be thrown into the parking lot. And, for bonus points, she had acquired tacos.

"So, how was your day, dear?" I asked.

She tossed me another folder.

"Research."

"Fancy. So, would you mind enlightening me to this whole crazy conspiracy I'm unwillingly a part of?"

"Take a look inside the folder," she said, taking down half her taco with one fell swoop.

Instead of making a snarky comment on her eating habits, I complied. Inside I found a picture of some old man paper clipped to a few pieces of paper listing his credentials. Behind those, I found a packet concerning our newly elected president.

"I'm bored already," I said.

"Keep going, love."

I continued until I found a piece of paper concerning President Patrick. I looked over the cliff-notes of his life, not stating anything I wasn't already aware me.

"How about something new?"

"There's one more thing in there," she stated as she took the rest of my taco. "Trust me, it's a doozy."

I flipped one more page over and found a picture of a young man. A Mr. Steve Jacobs.

"Who's this guy?"

"Presidential aid Steve Jacobs. This guy was Patrick's right hand man."

"Oh, shit. He's the one in Federal detention right now. I know this guy."

"WAS in Federal detention. Seems he escaped."

"When?"

"This afternoon. Full on man-hunt for this guy right now."

"How does he fit in?"

"He, like you, are being accused of murdering the leader of the free world."

"Right, but what are we doing about it?"

"Well, Eli, we're going to find him."

"Oh, great. When do we do that?"

"Are you done with your tacos?"

I hung my head, and put my shoes on.

"You're going to be the death of me."

"Ever think that might be the idea?"

I smirked, as we headed out.