

# **DECADE**

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Ten Stories About A Future (American) War

By Jack Kentala



# YEAR ONE

## Sharpshooters

"When I tell people that I work for the President, they assume I've met him."

"And you haven't?"

"Nah."

The other said nothing for a minute. The first turned from the rifle and looked at the second.

"You have?"

"You haven't?"

"But you have?"

"Yeah," said the second as he put his eyes back to the binoculars, "of course I have."

"Horseshit, Smith."

"I met him," said Smith.

"All right, hotshot," said the first, "what's he like?"

Smith, prone, motioned a shrug, but his position did not fully register the gesture.

"He's a nice guy. Pretty funny. And he's smarter than you think," said Smith.

"All right, all right," said the first. "But if you passed him on the street and--"

"What do you mean pass him on the street?" Smith interrupted.

"Barring a cadre of armed escorts, or gentleman like us providing distant cover, if you saw the man walking down the street, and you said hello, would he know your name?"

"He would," said Smith.

"On second thought, that wouldn't mean much. Names don't take much effort."

The radio clicked and a burst of static came through. Some distorted words hissed from the speaker.

"I want to know my shooter," said the tin voice on the far end.

Smith reached behind him and grabbed the radio. He put it to his lips and pressed the transmit button.

"Anderson shooting, myself on range," said Smith.

"Who's *myself*?" asked the tin voice.

"Smith," said Smith. "I'm myself. I am Smith."

Smith kept the radio in hand, the binoculars loose in the other. He squinted across the long stretch of grass and saw the thin airstrip off in the distance, bordered by the dim shapes of the semicircular hangars.

"Okay," said the tin voice. "Keep good time. Out."

Smith set down the radio.

"The hell was that?" asked Anderson.

"I can never tell."

Anderson put his eye back to the scope. He jostled from the reposition, and the crosshairs jerked across the magnified image. Smith sighed as he returned his eyes to the binocular holes.

"I fucking hate this job," said Smith.

Anderson said nothing. He checked his six points, gently maneuvering the sights along an imaginary grid while the image shifted across the dull, flat landscape, only a hint of green pines miles off. As he traced his route, he saw the men at parade rest on the asphalt, their tan uniforms turned grey through all the haze.

"At least give us some civilian action," said Smith. "Like an outdoor speech or something. These landings just jerk us around. What's the threat? Is one of our own guys gonna pop the chief when he comes off the ship? Fuck, they don't even have guns for these things. What're the ROEs if a boot throws a punch at the man in charge? They don't need a sniper for that."

"Sharpshooter," said Anderson.

"What?"

"You mean they don't need a *sharpshooter*," said Anderson.

"Fuck that," said Smith. "When people ask, I say I'm a *sniper*."

"You're not supposed to say that."

"'Sharpshooter' sounds like some bored dude shooting tin cans off a split-rail fence.

'Sniper' sounds so badass."

"It sounds badass for a job that doesn't have much badassness."

"Right you are," said Smith. "Not much badassitude when I'm not even behind the gun. I didn't go through qualification at goddamn Fort Benny to be the wind man. CDI factor way too low. And you, my friend, seem too sharp for this gig."

"Pun," said Anderson.

"Ha. You know what I mean."

"It pays all right," said Anderson. "Medical. Dental, too. I think it also fulfills whatever guilt I've had about not fulfilling my civic duty."

"So you get all misty when they string the flag up the pole?"

"A little," said Anderson.

"Oh, shit," said Smith.

The sky roared. A bloated, beige-brown airplane pierced the clouds and corkscrewed to the ground. Anderson took a deep breath, forcing a calm to counteract the nerve as he gripped his rifle a little tighter. He gently closed his left eye and moved his head an imperceptible increment forward, peering through the cylinder of the scope at the far distance behind the hangar.

"Just be my eagle eyes, Smith," said Anderson, his tone flattened to a dead monotone.

"You see any rogues in the shadows with a surf-air missy, give me good windage."

The plane screamed down. Anderson dialed out the sound and funneled all his concentration into his eye and the small movement of his hands guiding the scope and the barrel. His right-hand index finger touched the curved trigger and readied itself for the squeeze. His breath slowed, and his heart followed all the way down. He brought it all into his eyes and the scope and forgot about his sore knees and bruised elbows, the sting in his stomach, the thirst in his dry mouth. He let the crosshairs drift, rooting out all the natural targets across the grass and the strip, scanning the rock-solid men in uniform, all the drab-colored, dust-coated machines and vehicles that littered the airfield.

"Contact."

Anderson left his zen. The calm drained, and he felt the sparse tension in his nerves. He took his finger from the trigger and his hand twitched. He breathed, and his heart beat rapidly. He took his eye from the scope and looked out across the field with his plain, unaided, imperfect vision. The bloated airplane coasted across the runway. A group of uniformed men rolled out a staircase from the nearest hangar. The plane stopped, and the men put the staircase in position at the plane's front hatch. They hurried back to the interior of the hangar.

The plane sat there on the strip.

"Goddamn, I always forget how long this takes."

A helicopter whined in the distance. Anderson returned to his stiff shooting posture. Smith put the binoculars to his eyes and took careful mental notes. Nothing moved. The uniformed men kept perfectly still. A black helo flew overhead and touched down next to the brown plane. The rotors relaxed as a squad of men in suits ducked under the blades and approached the plane.

"That's a burn, right there," said Smith. "They land on a goddamn mil base, but he can't even trust the joes to keep him safe. He has to import his own muscle."

The men in suits clustered around the stairway. One approached the ranking officer at the head of the uniformed formation. The suited man leaned forward and spoke quietly into the officer's ear.

"But still, you have to be careful," said Smith.

"You, my friend," said Anderson, "subscribe to the paranoid logic that as more time goes by *without* an assassination attempt, it becomes closer to the time when an actual assassination attempt will happen. So let me blow your mind: you could flip a coin an infinite number of times, and each time it could land on heads. There's a big difference between improbable and impossible. The law of probability swings both ways."

"Not true."

"What?"

"The universe has to collapse sometime," said Smith.

"Okay, then. Every time you flip the coin before the universe collapses, it could land on heads."

"But that's not infinite."

"Fuck it," said Anderson, his words the same tone as a sigh. "You're right. I admit defeat."

"Oh, shit, there it is."

The frontmost door of the plane swung open. Two bulky men in suits pressed through the narrow pass and stood guard at the head of the stairs. A brown-haired man in a dark navy suit emerged. He stood on the top step and swung his hand in a wide arc through the air. The uniformed men politely applauded.

Anderson took his finger off the trigger and put the scope on the man at the head of the stairs. The man descended, followed by another duo of burly, sunglassesed men.

"He didn't bring his girl?" asked Smith. "Too bad. The best thing about a young President is a young First Lady. I tell you, in that Oval Office, I'd—"

"Say no more," said Anderson. "She's a classy broad."

The President reached the blacktop and, once he exchanged a brisk handshake and a broad smile with the ranking officer, was ushered into the center of a tight circle formed by the suits. He walked long, confident strides past the uniformed men, who all offered crisp salutes. The President returned the gesture. He moved toward a waiting motorcade.

"Distance to the car?" asked Anderson.

"I'd say two-hundred feet, but he's in the clear," said Smith. "Should I call in to command?"

"Nah," said Anderson. "Just wait for the order."

Anderson still had his eye behind the scope. His finger had found its way to the trigger. The crosshairs were aligned a bit to the left and bit higher than the back of the President's head. He tracked his movement.

"I could bump him off right now," said Anderson.

"Jesus Christ," said Smith, the droll tone drained from his voice, replaced with an hint of urgency. "Don't say that, man. Good thing I had the radio off. You'd be iced if any of the higher-ups heard that talk."

"But still," said Anderson.

"He's a nice guy," said Smith. "Leave him alone."

"I bet some whacks would pay top dollar to get him waxed. How much money would you go for it?"

"There're always some dudes who want the President dead," said Smith. "That's why the suits show up. That's why we're out here. Nothing says leadership and stability than the constant fear of assassination."

The President strode ahead at an even pace, a hundred feet from the waiting car. An aide opened the rear door in anticipation. The uniformed men still stood at parade rest, facing forward.

"Hell," said Smith, "things aren't so bad right now. We're not bogged down in any piss-and-shit wars. The dollar's pretty good. The Sox beat the Yankees."

"It's boring," said Anderson.

"Bored is good," said Smith.

"A few minutes ago, you thought otherwise."

"That's different."

"Is it?"

The President was fifty feet from the waiting car. The helo took off. The staircase was rolled away, and the big brown plane began to turn around.

"But still," said Anderson.

Smith set down his binoculars and sneezed. Anderson flinched. His crosshairs jumped toward the sky, and when he reset his sights, he saw the black limo door close and the motorcade drive off. Anderson took his finger off the trigger.

The radio hissed.

"Back to the staging area," said the voice on the other end.

"Check," said Smith, and he flipped the switch on his handset.

Anderson pushed off the ground and rose to his feet. He brushed the gravel dust off his knees. He arched his back and stretched. Across the distance, he barely saw the individual forms of the men on the airstrip. They moved back into the hangars and the waiting convoy of their own dusty, brown vehicles. Anderson picked up the rifle and the bipod. He put the lens caps on the scope.

"I'm hungry," said Smith. "You hungry?"

Anderson nodded, and the two walked off down the hillside.

# YEAR TWO

## Rogues

Guards in unmarked black uniforms surrounded most of the square in front of the Student Union, and when Will showed up, he couldn't squeeze past. The guards stood a few feet apart, and right in front of them were the back rows of the tight assembly. Will went toward the guard's right side, and the guard, his back turned, shifted a little to the right, blocking the passage. Will tried for the left, and the guard shuffled left.

"Hey, boss," said Will, "how 'bout you let me in?"

The guard, his arms tightly folded across his chest, turned his head and saw Will in his periphery.

"No dice," said the guard. "We have enough of you scruffs down there."

"Scruffs?"

"Scruffians," said the guard. "Rogues. Anyone whose haircut wouldn't pass regulation."

Will cursed under his breath and took a step back.

"But I'll tell you what," said the guard. He pointed at the ground to his immediate right.

"You stand right here, in this spot," said the guard, "and there'll be no trouble, right?"

The guard tapped the black metal baton strapped to his leg.

"Sure thing," said Will.

"Hey, Mike," said the guard to another guard on his right, "take a step and let this scruff stand tall with the big boys."

Mike nodded and complied. Will stepped in.

Ahead, some stone steps descended into the common pit of the plaza in front of the Union. A thousand or so boys and girls stood packed in. They blended together in a random assortment of hues from their dyed hair and their colored shirts. On the far end of the square, the steps rose up to the Union, and on level ground stood a line of young guys and two girls in white shirts, all of them facing a centered podium. Behind that was the Head Guy, and from his vantage, Will couldn't see his face. He only saw the wide gestures of his arms and clenched fists. He spoke loudly, but across the distance, Will couldn't hear most of the words. There weren't any speakers or microphones, and the Head Guy's words barely echoed past the crowd's midpoint.

"Fuck this shit," said Will. "I was supposed to be up top with my crew."

"What's your excuse?" asked the guard.

"Had to take my dog to the vet."

"What kind of dog?" asked the guard.

"British lab."

"What's the difference between a regular lab and a British lab?"

"I have to walk her on the left side of the street," said Will.

The guard nodded at the thought. He then cracked an uneven smirk, and he let go a quick laugh.

"That's good," said the guard.

"Yeah? A lot of people don't get it."

The Head Guy behind the podium raised both arms in the air and pumped his fists. "No more" something, he said, from what Will heard of it, "and spy" something, on something "citizens."

The front of the crowd burst into applause. The cheer rippled to the back. Will clapped politely. The guard glared at him.

"Sorry," said Will.

"Don't worry about it," said the guard. "I'm just pissed I had to wake my ass up at six o'clock on a Sunday morning to prep for this."

"What's to prep for twelve hours?"

"You don't want to know. I'll tell you what, though," said the guard. "I don't get paid nearly enough to give a shit about preserving law and order. Some lofty ideals sound pretty good right now. Hell, I'd subscribe to just about any cause that promised a future in which I wouldn't have to pay six-hundred bones for my allergy meds."

The Head Guy's voice increased in volume, and he went through his motions. "Materialism is" something, he declared, and "American citizens and students" are probably "sick" of something. He kept it up and the frontmost rows drowned him out with applause, and not long afterward he gave one final fist-pump, stepped back from the podium, and disappeared behind the big white columns of the Union.

"All right, scruff," said the guard as he unholstered his baton and snapped it to its full length, "time to roll out."

"No problem, boss," said Will.

Will backed down off the steps and walked toward the street. A long line of parked cars idled on the shoulder, the drivers sitting with the passenger-side windows rolled down. They started to drive off once they saw the guards directing the foot-traffic of the leaving students. Will moved away from the mass and rubbed his fingers together in his pocket. His inner ear buzzed as the circuit made the connection.

"Yeah?" said a little voice in his head.

"Paul, where you at?" Will said, moving his jaw in a chewing motion.

"Where I was supposed to be. Where you weren't."

"Sorry."

"Yeah, yeah, it's all right. This is just phase zero. You good now?"

"Yeah."

"All right. Meet me up by the weird statues."

"What time you got?" asked Will, grinding his teeth and rubbing his tongue along the bottom row of his molars. "My watch is hosed."

"Beer o'clock," said the other end.

"All right," said Will. "I'll be there in a minute."

Will made his way along the sidewalks that ran through the shadows of the tall buildings. Most were deserted, but clusters of students passed, all talking in hushed, excited tones. Most were under twenty, and they glanced at Will with a palpable degree of hostility. Will felt old. By the time Will reached the weird statues, the sun was blocked by the western Halls and the sky was mostly orange.

Paul walked a slow circle around the biggest statue. He wore black slacks, a white shirt, and a blue tie loosened around his unbuttoned collar. He held a suit jacket over his shoulder. He nodded to himself and worked his jaw. Once he spotted Will's approach, he held out a raised index finger to Will, turned his back, and finished his conversation. He was done once Will reached his position.

"Law class lecture," said Paul as he readjusted the jacket. "The rest looked at me like I was some corporate type."

"Close enough," said Will.

"Let's walk," said Paul, and they started off to the northeast.

They walked in silence most of the way. Each point where the sidewalk crossed a main road, they saw a police cruiser. Over the course of a half-mile, they saw a dozen, a third of them unmarked.

"Nothing else to do on a Sunday?" Paul stated, directed to himself.

They broke free of the central campus and walked a long stretch that flanked an empty parking lot. Tufts of yellowed grass grew from pavement cracks.

Paul looked over his shoulder.

"I think we're out of range," said Paul.

"Yeah."

"So I've been thinking about uniforms," said Paul. "Nothing too obvious. Maybe just suits and white shirts. It could give the illusion that we're upstanding citizens."

"That decoy would work for, what? A week?"

"A week is a week. You'd rather have us make fake police uniforms?"

"If we didn't end up shooting each other, the age would give most of us away. Anyone under twenty-five, that is."

"Then let's round up the late-twenties crowd. Convince them that if anything gets worse, they could come on board with us."

"There's not much of us left on campus," said Will.

"You're right. Most people think of grad school as a prison term these days."

They neared another intersection.

"Probe," said Paul, nodding ahead.

The front half of a black cruiser stuck out from the corner of a building. It rolled forward. The passenger-side window came down, revealing the dark interior of the car. Two black-uniformed guards peered out from their shell and watched Will and Paul approach.

"How's the dog?" asked Paul.

"Good."

"I like dogs," said Paul. "I just don't like dog hair all over my clean apartment."

"Then get a gen-eng one," said Will.

"I don't have the skrilla."

"Did you just say skrilla?"

They passed the cruiser. Will glanced inside and saw one of the guards pull the screen out of the dash. The backlight lit up the interior, and a solid-blue background popped up, emblazoned with "MuniNet" and an imposing, official-looking crest next to an icon of a smiling computer. The cruiser slid silently along the road, and it turned a corner and passed from view.

They heard the low growl of leaking, thumping bass. They walked past a cluster of low, interconnected buildings lining the streetfront. The music grew louder.

"Ghost town out here," said Will.

"It'll pick up. If not, our luck."

None of the buildings were marked. They entered the doorway where the sound was most direct. Once the door sealed behind them, the bright outdoor sun disappeared, and their eyes grew to adjust to the dim, smoky haze of the interior. A narrow hall stretched ahead. They followed it around a corner, then through another door. They passed a skinny guy in a black shirt, white letters that read "SECURITY" across the front. He stared at the wall straight ahead, but he nodded as the two passed.

About two-hundred people stood at various points in the open main room. Some stood near a raised stage at the front, where a few guys set up some amps and guitars. A big stack of speakers throbbed to the beat of piped-in music. Paul and Will made their way to the bar in the corner. They saw a few others at the opposite end of the space, and they exchanged a familiar nod. They sat on their stools and the bartender came over. Paul leaned across the bar.

"Hey, can you turn that down a notch?" said Paul.

The bartender nodded and complied. The noise filtered down. They ordered drinks and started drinking. Will turned around and took stock of the crowd. A pale yellow worklight shined in the corner of the stage as the soundcheckers went up and down its length. A few neon beer signs glowed behind the bar, but only dim red bulbs shined from the upstairs balcony and spilled onto the main area. In the dimness, Will couldn't see much.

"So Jim didn't show?" asked Will.

Paul set down his drink.

"Jim?" he asked. "Oh, right."

"The hell else am I supposed to call him?"

"We're testing out some codenames," said Paul. "In case it's necessary or something. We're not allowed to call him Jim."

"What's he called now?"

Paul squinted at the ceiling and tapped his fingers against his glass.

"I think he's Black Rook right now."

"Isn't that offensive?"

"What? I don't know. It's something about a color and a chess piece. You know, Black Rook, Red Pawn, Green Bishop."

"That doesn't leave much room for anyone else."

"They don't want a lot of people," said Paul. "It's like a good club or bar. Too many people find out about it, and then it's gone."

Will nodded and finished his drink. The bartender took notice and pointed to the empty glass. Will tapped his nose and the bartender filled another. Paul didn't move until he finished three drinks. He then pulled his tie through its slipknot and stuffed it in his pocket. He and Will turned around and watched the band play a set. They had a new drink every handful of songs,

and the place filled to decent capacity. Once the band stopped, the piped-in music came back at a forte, and some of the mass migrated outside, elsewhere.

Paul elbowed Will in the ribs.

"That son of a bitch," said Paul.

Will followed Paul's gaze. Near the corner of the bar, the Head Guy emerged from one of the guarded hallways that serviced the nighttime exterior. A pretty girl in perpetual mid-laugh stood next to him. The Head Guy took slow, uneven steps, one shorter than the other.

"Goddamn if that limp isn't fake," said Paul. "Fucking Jim. I was there when the City Guard shook us down. Jim mouthed off and got a little slap in the face. Open-handed, even. Every time he tells the story, he adds an injury. He probably tells people he was shot."

"That's rich," said Will.

"So a limp impresses some broads? I could fake a limp. Except he beat me to it. It might be worth it, so then everyone would figure that if my limp is fake, his limp is fake."

Jim spied Paul from across the room and gave a nod of recognition. Paul gave a half-hearted counter-nod. Jim turned back to the semicircle that had formed around him, and he was immediately engulfed in conversation. He took a drink with one hand and brushed the hair away from his eyes with the other.

"Piece of work isn't even going to come over here and shake my hand," said Paul.

"Figures. How'd you like the man's speech?"

"I couldn't even hear it," said Will.

"Yeah. The school wouldn't let us use any loudspeakers. Some system we've got. Speech can be free as long as no one hears it."

"Forward me a copy."

"I don't think you want it. I'd have to give it the once-over. Jim's not the best with the written word."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," said Paul. "I looked at the transcript before today. He spelled it 'Marshall Law.' You know, like some guy named Bill Marshall invented it, like it was Bill Marshall's Form of Law. Not martial law, martial spelled like 'mart.' Martial law like martial arts. You know, kung fu and shit. Well," said Paul, emptying another drink with a long pull, "I suppose every cause needs a pretty face to front it, and some brains like you and me running the real show. You didn't hear this from me, but I don't even know if he really believes in the cause. Hey, barman!"

"I don't know about another round," said Will.

"Oh, come on, just one more."

Will took out his phone. He held it in his palm and pulled out the pin. The machine did the rest, and he felt the pinch on his wrist. The screen read "0.16." Will disengaged the pin, and he wiped the drop of blood that appeared on his skin.

"Come on, just up to point-eighteen," said Paul.

"Fine," said Will.

They had another. The bar filled up, and Will's stool was involuntarily pushed closer to Paul's. They sat elbow to elbow, and their eyes and between-drink thoughts mainly focused on the wood grain of the bar.

"It's looks like we've got some criminal masterminds in our midst," said a voice from behind.

Will turned and focused his vision. He realized both his eyes were only a quarter open. Jim stood behind them, beaming. He wedged himself forward. Will almost fell out of his chair.

"Shouldn't you two be holed up in your houses, dissecting every bit of political news pouring out of our overbearing media?" asked Jim.

"Sunday night," said Paul, his voice little more than a controlled mumble. "The one sacred night off."

"I didn't take you for a religious man," said Jim.

"I'm not. I just follow whatever tradition allows for a certain amount of unquestioned time off work. I was thinking about celebrating Ramadan this year."

"What about you?" asked Jim.

"I don't care until they name the new Vice President," said Will.

"More like Vice Dictator," said Jim.

"We could be so lucky," said Paul. "Then we could abbreviate it to Vice Dick."

"Ha!" said Jim. "That's why you're my number-two man. Good luck tomorrow."

Jim slapped Paul on the back and promptly disappeared into the crowd.

"Asshole," said Paul, and he ordered another drink for himself and Will. "Last one," he said, "I promise. We best head out at a reasonable time, since, uh, tomorrow morning we're going to buy some, uh, *hammers*."

"What do you need me at the hardware store for?" asked Will.

Paul leaned closer and hissed, "*Guns*, fool."

"Oh, yeah," said Will. "Right."

Will woke up the next morning with a foggy mental image of the return trip home. Before his feet hit the ground, he downed the glass on water on his nightstand, ignoring the thin film of dust on its surface. He grit his teeth and stood up. His vision went dark as swayed on his feet. Once the feeling passed, he looked at the corner of his room and saw the dark kennel protected by the wire door, behind which was a pink nose and a long snout.

He pulled on a hooded sweatshirt and opened the gate. The dog gave a cursory sniff of Will's feet before it ran downstairs and went out the kitchen door. As Will followed, he saw the sun's glare on the wood floor, revealing all its scratches and curved strands of reddish-brown dog hair.

The doorbell rang and Will answered it after the first panic-tinge subsided. He peered through the window and saw Paul, who also wore a hooded sweatshirt despite the reasonable topside temperature. Will opened the door for him.

"You driving?" asked Will.

"Unfortunately," said Paul.

Paul handed a plastic-lidded paper coffee cup toward Will. Paul had his own held tight in the other hand.

"Nah, I don't drink that stuff," said Will.

"It'll take your mind off it," said Paul.

"You ever see those pictures of spiders on caffeine?"

"What? No," said Paul.

"Well, the web is all fucked up," said Will.

"Well, I'm no spider," said Paul. "Come on, lock up the dog and let's head out."

By the time they were in Paul's car, Paul had finished the first coffee and started the second. Will changed his mind and they shared, drinking from opposite sides of the cup, like that made any difference. He ran a hand through his unkempt hair and picked at his fingernails.

Once they broke clear of the neighborhoods, they turned onto the freeway and faced the long southward stretch over the river. Few cars drove in either direction. Paul cracked the windows and a cold rush of air cycled through the interior. The road descended from the high grounds, and they drove out over the water, across the red-metal bridge that overlooked the near marshlands and the open land surrounding. The only near structure was the grey spike of the power plant about a mile distant. A plume of steam spewed from its top, and a series of white lights ran down its length. They blinked intermittently.

"Where we headed, out to the burbs?" asked Will.

"Easthaven," said Paul.

"Shouldn't I be blindfolded?"

Paul shrugged.

They cleared the bridge and drove a few more miles to the southeast. Paul took an exit and steered into a crop of unassuming neighborhoods. He pulled into the driveway of a two-story house that didn't look much different than Will's. He threw the gear in park and took the key from the ignition.

"We're here?" Will asked. "Shouldn't it be some rusty warehouse past some derelict railroad tracks?"

Paul unclipped his seatbelt and exited the car. Will did likewise and followed Paul to the front of the house. A guy in khakis, a blue dress shirt, and glasses answered the door.

"Come on in," he said immediately and warmly.

"How's it going?" asked Paul as he offered a handshake.

The dealer accepted it and smiled politely.

"Pretty good," he said.

Will offered a handshake.

"I'm Will," said Will.

"Nice to meet you," said the dealer, who turned to Paul and said, "You can leave your shoes on. And let's get started. I know you guys are busy."

The dealer led them across the main level to the kitchen. Piled on the kitchen table were a few black duffle bags.

"I assume it's the same request as relayed by our friend Mr. K.?" asked the dealer.

"Yeah, I think so," said Paul.

"For you and Will here?"

"Just us, for now," said Paul.

The dealer unzipped the nearest bag and pulled out a black piece of metal. He thrust it toward Will. Will took it in his grasp. The dealer pulled out another and handed it to Paul. The dealer pulled out a third and held it flat on his palm.

"M9A1," said the dealer. "I won't lie. These have seen some action."

Paul handled the piece and examined it under the light.

"It looks new," said Paul. "Smells new, even."

"They've all been refurbished," said the dealer. "Deserts and jungles are much more demanding environments than modern urban warfare."

"I didn't say anything about anything urban," said Paul.

"Oh, I didn't mean to intrude or speculate," said the dealer. "Not my business."

Will held the gun in his hand. It wasn't as heavy as it looked. He pressed the button on the handle and the magazine popped out. He pulled it all the way out and saw the empty metal cap on its end. He nodded and thrust it back into the body of the gun. Paul continued his check, and Will copied his motions.

"Max range fifty meters," said the dealer, "and with special rounds--"

"I'm familiar with the model," said Paul. "It has a nice action. All right. Sold."

"And you, Will?"

"Yeah," said Will, nodding vaguely, "this'll do."

"It's all yours," said the dealer. "Mr. K. will take care of the financial transaction. Anything else besides ammunition? Perhaps a quick field-stripping demonstration?"

"I'm familiar with this model," Paul said again. "How about that bag? A case? Holsters?"

"Cases are in the bag," said the dealer. "I'll have to get back to you on holsters."

"How about we buy the two and get a third on the house?" asked Paul, pointing the barrel of the gun toward the third in the dealer's hand.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the dealer, "but this particular piece isn't for sale."

"Sentimental value?" asked Paul.

"Something to that extent," said the dealer.

"Great," said Paul. "I suppose we'll be on our way. That was painless."

"I aim for that," said the dealer.

"Pun," said Will.

They laughed as the dealer collected the guns and put them in their cases. He handed the black bag to Paul. The three headed for the door. Will looked out the front window and saw a silver car pull into the driveway.

"Don't worry, don't worry," said the dealer. "Another client."

At the door, they exchanged another round of handshakes.

"Nice meeting you, Will," said the dealer, and as he smiled, a few wrinkles formed around his eyes. Will saw a thin purple scar appear across the bridge of the dealer's nose. Will returned the smile, and he and Paul walked back to the car. They passed two guys headed up the driveway toward the house.

"You didn't see us here, buddy," said one, who offered a salute to Paul.

They got in the car. Paul handed Will the black bag, and as Paul pulled out onto the street, Will unzipped the bag, opened a wood case, and took out a black piece of metal. He held it down below the windows, aiming at his feet. He closed one eye and aligned the sights.

"Cut it out," said Paul.

Will lowered the gun. He weighed the metal in his hands. He ejected the clip and pressed down on the magazine spring.

"I don't know how I feel about this," said Will.

"Better get used to it," said Paul.

# YEAR THREE

## Acronyms

"Hey, dumbass! Get in here!"

"Who do you mean, sir? Several men here fit that description."

"Smith! I want Smith!"

Smith stood up from his desk and turned off his screen. He glanced at the other uniformed guys in the open bullpen and tried to gather little bits of intel from stray glances. He tugged at the bottom of his uniform shirt, colored with grey and blue camouflage splotches. He steeled himself as he turned the corner into the XO's office. The XO leaned forward on his desk and straightened the framed photographs facing him, all in a neat row.

"Uh, sir," began Smith, "should I stand at attention?"

"Sit down."

Smith sat. The XO ceased the straightening. He leaned back in his chair and got comfortable. He put one hand over his mouth and looked pensive. His eyes were cold and sharp. Smith forced a swallow in his dry mouth.

"You like the press office, Smith?"

"Sir, uh, I do, sir. Yes. It's fine."

"You like the job, Smith?"

"Indeed, sir. It's not too hard at all," he began, then seeing no change in the XO's expression, he backpedaled and added, "but not easy work, I mean. I'm saying that I don't think the job is below me or—"

The XO held up his palm and Smith stopped. The XO rummaged through the papers on his desk. He picked up a lone slice, leaned forward, and slid it across the desk, through the narrow border-crossing between all his frames.

"Look at that, Smith, and tell me what it says."

Smith took the sheet. It was a blank piece of semi-thick, semi-formal paper, its color a few shades removed from glaring, pure white. At the head of the sheet was an official letterhead, dressed up with a fancy crest and bold lettering, a deliberately-faded watermark stamped into the sheet itself.

"Go ahead. Read it."

"USCC," said Smith. "Central Rogue Detention Center."

"Read that second part again, Smith."

Smith lowered the sheet below the XO's eyeline, since the tremor in Smith's left hand made the page shake like a stiff leaf.

"Central Rogue Detention Center."

"What's the word that starts with an 'R,' Smith?"

"Rogue."

"Spell it out for me, Smith."

"Are oh you gee ee."

"Now say it again."

"Rogue."

"Do you see the problem, Smith? Do you see it?"

Smith said nothing.

"The problem, Smith," said the XO, "is that this is our facility's official letterhead for all media relations. The problem, Smith," said the XO, "is that this was your sole responsibility for the last three days. And even though this facility prides itself on a level of autonomy, giving everyone some room to breathe without the entirety of the system sitting on their chest, some boners are bound to happen."

"Boners, sir?"

"You spelled 'rogue' wrong, Smith. You spelled it as 'rouge.' You know, *rouge*. Rouge like red. Like the color girls put on their cheeks to make them look prettier."

Smith stopped breathing for a moment. The XO settled in his chair.

"I see a little rouge coming into your face right now, actually."

"I'm sorry, sir," Smith began. His eyes glanced at the floor, at the polished tips of his own shiny boots. "I'm sorry. I didn't know and—"

Again, the XO held up his hand. Smith stopped squirming, and the XO let the moment settle.

"We've called the media," the XO said calmly, "and we all had a good laugh. This might work to our advantage. If it shows we have a sense of humor, it might ease all this un-American, unjust-imprisonment, liberal whining."

Smith nodded. He forced another swallow.

"You okay, Smith? You need a drink of water?"

"I'm fine, sir."

"Good. Because there was another little error in your press release. In your bio, you should have written that you served in the Marine *Corps*. See oh are pee ess. Not the Marine *Core*, like apple core."

"Understood, sir."

"It's not your fault that these things are hard to spell," said the XO. "That's why men with stripes, such as yourself, abbreviate it to ess gee tee, and it's why I'm the ex oh."

"Understood, sir."

"So, new initiative," said the XO. "Break it down to acronyms. You're an ess gee tee of the you ess see see stationed at the see are dee see in the you ess ay."

"CRDC?"

"Central Rogue Detention Center. People don't like the term 'rogue,' anyway. Use the acronym. Or come up with a catchy synonym. Put that English degree to good use."

"I don't have an English degree, sir."

"You don't? I thought you said you did."

"I used to work with a guy who did."

"Oh," said the XO. "Well, that explains a few things."

Smith gave a curt nod. He braced his palms on the arms of the chair, ready to spring free of the office. The XO, yet again, held up his hand.

"But while I have you here, there's one last bit of business. You're a good military man, Smith. Am I right?"

"I would hope to believe likewise, sir."

"You're a decorated infantryman. A solid NCO."

"Thank you, sir."

"With a tour under your belt?"

"Two, sir, in the Corps, and another stretch on a classified detail."

"Which is why I believe your talents are being wasted behind a desk," said the XO. "They say that the ones who came back are the best ones. Because, you know, they survived. As you may have heard, Smith, our country is in a bit of a transition. A moral crisis. The higher-ups term it as OWNW."

"Excuse me, sir?"

"Old war-new war. Old war is overseas. Proper battlefields and uniformed enemies and whatnot. The new one is on our soil. But at least we know the enemy, right?"

"I would hope so, sir."

"Do you, Smith?"

"Do I what, sir?"

"Know the enemy?"

"I suppose."

"Have you been on a college campus within the last five years?"

"I have, sir."

"Good. Then you know the enemy. Tomorrow morning, report to Range 13 on the far side of the compound. You'll be interrogating rogues."

"Rogues, sir? You mean the slugs?"

"Anyone with rank calls them rogues. Or, as your writing might say, *rouges*. Dismissed, sergeant."

Smith stood and offered a crisp salute. The XO, still seated, lowered his eyes to the papers on his desk and entered his own sphere of concentration. Smith left the room for the

bullpen. The red-eyed, grey-uniformed desk corporals could barely contain their smirks, all having heard the full exchange through the open doorway. Smith paced briskly to his desk, grabbed his papers and pens and hurried off. He felt his face redden all the way out the room and down the long brown hall, as he walked through pockets of moonlight and harsh electric glare coming through the windows. He went straight for his room a quarter-mile through the compound, and once inside, he locked the door, pulled off his boots, killed the light, and crawled into his bunk.

Morning came soon enough. The window unfogged its surface and let in the bright wash of the outside world. Smith stood up and gave a cursory glance out the window. Across a dusty grassplain he saw the opposite end of the hollow square building and a blank stretch of sky above. From the sink in the corner of the room he splashed water on his face and gave himself the once-over in the mirror bolted to the wall. Nothing looked out of place, and no one ever made adverse comments about bloodshot eyes or a few days' worth of stubble. He then took his pills, laced up his boots, and exited for the hall.

He went left instead of right. The main corridor stretched far ahead, servicing adjacent halls that branched out to form the central labyrinth of the complex. The separate halls divided the main corridor into little portions, and each looked the same, giving the long walk a sort of optical illusion. The corridor itself was all dark earth tones that swallowed the sunlight beaming in from the floor-to-ceiling windows. Each chunk had a long wood table pressed against the wall, hyperpolished and dust-free, and each had the sole purpose of holding a vase containing an identical arrangement of flowers. Above the flowers was a oil painting hung on the wall, and all were variants of the same subject: a big burly man leaning aggressively, optimistically forward in a big leather chair, wearing a dark suit or a military uniform outfitted with a cluster of medals and ribbons, all topped with a grey crew cut and hawkish, piercing stares.

Smith turned the corner to another corridor of the square inner perimeter. The view shifted. Gone was the brown polish behind, replaced with an unapologetic blandness that gave no effort to dress up the vista. The long stretch of hall was uninviting, and it seemed its only purpose was to continue the geometric precision of the inner square. Smith crossed its distance, straying respectively to the righthand side of the invisible symmetry-line. He encountered no one, and glances down adjacent halls gave glimpses only of distant guards, bored at their posts.

He turned at the next junction. A solid wall blocked passage, and in the center was a steel hatch that guarded further access. "HOLDING" read a black paint-stencil at the top of the door. Smith engaged its workings, and the locks let him pass. He stepped through the threshold, and the door sealed behind, hissing as it settled with the wall. Smith turned and looked at the main corridor. Ahead, all was grey and shades of grey, with a hint of clinical whiteness. There were no windows, and the only points of orientation were the separate halls that trailed off to the right.

Smith took one step forward. The sound of his boot made no echo. He walked along the wall, looking down each separate hall. An arrow appeared on the screen near the middle hall, and "SMITH" appeared in small black type. Smith followed the bearing, and the screen erased itself. The smaller hall continued forward at an even pitch, though each step gave Smith the sensation that he was descending through some underground passage. Secure doors lined the hall, all marked with a stenciled number, but none had windows to allow an interior view. The tomb-quiet lingered. Even the fluorescents overhead emitted no sound.

Each junction led four ways: left, right, straight, and behind, and each serviced another hall the exact same length and color and smell as the one proceeding, all fitted with the same number of cell doors, the only difference being the small numbers printed on their surface. Smith followed the signs with his name, each clearing as he passed. Finally, he found one that contained an arrow and "SMITH - RANGE 13."

He finally located an area different from the rest. The hall opened to a large room, divided into two separate tiers. A desk-island blocked the main approach, and a guard, chewing something, sat at its main panel. He awakened from an open-eyed stupor as his machine clicked and displayed a few prompts. The guard looked up and pointed at Smith.

"Smith," he said. It was not a question.

"Yeah."

"Hold up a sec."

The guard picked up a beige telephone and pressed it to his lips.

"I need Morgan up front," said the guard. "Morgan up front for Smith. Morgan up front for Smith."

The guard's voice came out through all the speakers in the halls. Somewhere in the wires, the guard's voice lost all inflection and color, and what came through was a loud mumble that lowered the guard's voice two octaves. The guard set down the phone.

"He should be here in a minute. You'll be his trainee. The oyk is out on vacay."

"Excuse me?"

"The oyk. The oh eye see. Officer in charge. He's on vacay. Vacation."

"Right," said Smith.

The guard idly examined his controls. He clenched his jaw and suppressed a yawn. A pair of footsteps neared. Two uniformed guards came into view. They carried a man in a blue jumpsuit. The guard in front held the man's ankles, and the guard in back held the man's arms. The man was limp, his eyes were closed, and his tongue hung out of his mouth. He produced a long moan that did not change pitch, and it gave no indication of ceasing.

"He's slipping, he's slipping!" said the guard in front.

"Well don't drop him!" said the guard in back.

"All right, then set him down," said the guard in front.

Both stopped moving and they set down the man in the jumpsuit. They rubbed their hands on their uniforms.

"On three," said the guard in front. "One, two, three."

They hoisted the jumpsuited man again. The guards groaned.

"Heavy motherfucker for a skinny guy," the guard in back grumbled as they passed behind the desk.

"You done for the session?" asked the guard at the desk.

"Yeah," said the guard in back. "Open up the box."

The desk guard fiddled with his controls. A sharp click sounded on a cell door on the lower tier. The front guard shifted his grip on the jumpsuited man and pulled the heavy door open. Both guards disappeared inside the room and deposited their load. They re-emerged and shut the door. One of the guards wiped a line of sweat from his brow.

"All right. Time to hit the mess and roll out for the shift," said one.

"I've still got a few more slugs before I meet my quota," said the other.

"All right," said the first, and as he walked past Smith, he gave him the once-over.

The second approached the desk.

"I'm Bill Morgan. You Smith?"

"Yeah, I'm Smith."

Smith held out his hand. Bill raised his in surrender.

"You don't want to touch these paws. I've been handling unwashed slugs all day. You new here?"

"No, I've been over at the Executive Officer's office for the past three weeks."

"So you're new here," said Bill. "New to the Range, at least. Come on, let's walk. I want to finish my shift before I fall asleep."

Bill took off down the lower lefthand hall. Smith followed.

"I got a few detes before you came over," said Bill. "I hear you've got some overseas experience."

"A bit," said Smith.

"Modesty. I like it. We're a bit different here than most military shops. It's first-name basis. A few guys are paranoid that the slugs will try to kill our families or something if they find out our last names. So rip off that name patch if you want. So I'm Bill, anyway. You?"

"Mike," said Smith.

"Mike Smith? That's a generic name, if you ask me."

"You haven't heard my middle name."

"What's that?"

"Take a guess."

"I don't know. Thomas?"

"Yeah."

"For real?"

"Michael Thomas Smith," said Smith.

"Might as well be John Doe."

"Well, William Morgan's no real gem either."

Bill said nothing. He kept the forward pace.

"Sorry," said Smith.

"Oh, that's good," said Bill. "I laughed. I laugh on the inside, though. You get used to it. You don't want to portray yourself as human when you deal with these slugs. I think I read that in a field manual or a training manual somewhere. An FM or TM, anyway. But I take it you've done this before, right, Mike?"

"A few field interviews, here and there."

"Well, this is cake compared to that. These guys speak English, at least. The easy ones, you can guilt them into divulging. Some we're-fellow-Americans camaraderie. But to start you off, we'll tagteam it. Sort of a good-cop, bad-cop thing. I haven't done that in a while. I just did two brute-force runs this morning, so I want to try something with a little more finesse."

Two guards appeared ahead. One walked with his hands folded on top of his head, his elbows pointing out past his ears. The other walked with his left hand in his pocket, and his right hand swinging forward, keeping time to unheard music.

The one with a hand in his pocket said to the other, "Why go through the trouble, bro? We're all a bunch of rank dudes up in here. No broads around to impress. Shit, the slugs smell something awful already, and your own flowery aroma almost makes it worse. You get used to the piss smell, and then you walk into pockets of your department-store scent and it skews my palette so that the rest of the smells here really get to me. I need to keep my edge blunt."

The other said, "If I shouldn't care about personal hygiene, by that logic, why care about anything else? Why wear uniforms? Why look people in the eye when we talk? Why wake up in the fucking morning?"

They passed and gave a nod toward Bill and a hesitant glance at Smith. Bill veered off to the right. Smith followed. The left side of the hall was blank, and the right had a number of doors. But they weren't cell doors, and they had no numbers. Instead, pieces of paper were taped on their surface, and each had a different label scrawled in ballpoint. "Stress Pos.," said one, then "Elctrcty.," "Wtrbrd.," "Balls," and "Misc." Bill pulled open the door labeled "Chair."

Inside: three grey walls, a grey floor, a wall-length mirror, and a panel of bright overheads that smiled down from the ceiling. In the exact center of the room was a metal chair bolted to the ground, fitted with some leather straps. Set into the floor below was a drain. The floor dipped as they passed over into the room's middle. The smell of bleach hung in the air.

"It's not much, but at least they cleaned it," said Bill as he inspected the straps that hung from the chair. "This is an easy room. We just use it for round one."

Bill pointed at the wall-length mirror. A door set into the wall serviced the hidden room behind it.

"You can hide in there," said Bill. "Take notes if anything good comes up. We don't record or anything, so we need to remember it."

"Any ground rules?"

"Um..." Bill began as his eyes searched the ceiling. "Nah. Nothing really. You can smack him around if you want. Try not to break anything too bad. The guy we're talking to hasn't been here long, so I don't think he'll try to bite off his tongue. But if he does, just hit your panic switch and we'll bring in the medico to calm him down or sew any loose bits back."

"So who is this guy?"

"Um, I'm not sure. Probably some small-timer if we haven't killed him. Yet, that is. We're pretty sure he's a rogue. We're getting good at telling them apart. I tell you, the first year I was here, we got some of the general whacks who just flipped out and did some random act that we thought was related to the rogue cause. So, of course, order came down that every slug is actually valuable intel, and if they cause trouble, we still need to coax it out. Reason with them or something. But, you know, not everyone in a prison is all sorry and gloomy and introspective, with some sad, sage wisdom to impart from all their solitary time. Some of them are just dumb, mean motherfuckers who are using the rogue cause as justification to just go wild."

The door clicked open. Another guard took a half-step in, but he froze when he saw the two. Bill, his hands on his hips, turned toward him.

"Oh, shit, I'm sorry," said the guard. "I thought I had this room scheduled."

"Nah, it's cool, bro," said Bill. "In a few mins, I would've been pissed if I had some momentum going with my slug."

"Sorry again," said the guard as he backed out and closed the door.

Bill pulled up his right sleeve and checked his wristwatch.

"Intake should bring him soon," he said. "You're all clear?"

"Yeah, I think," said Smith.

"It's just the first session, so it shouldn't take too much to get the idea across. The slug's been in solitary for probably a week or two without any questions, so his imagination of this is probably far worse than any of it. Hell, if he was dumb enough to get caught, he probably isn't smart enough to see through all these shenanigans. So I'll smack him around a bit, and once I get sore, I'll storm out and say something about getting pliers to pull off his fingernails or something. Then you come in and give the soft sell. Check?"

"Check."

"All right, Mike. You can go hide in that other room."

Smith nodded and entered the auxiliary space. The expanse of the mirror was clear on the opposite side, and Smith had an unobstructed view through the other end. Bill rolled up the sleeves of his uniform. He took off his wristwatch and pocketed it. He pulled out a pair of thin surgical gloves and put them on. Bill turned to the mirror and gave a thumbs up.

"We good?" he said, his voice filtered through a hidden channel.

Smith saw a microphone set on the table below the window. He pressed the talk button.

"Yeah."

A single knock sounded on the hall door. Bill opened it. Two guards dragged in a guy in a blue jumpsuit. Bill crossed to the near wall and leaned against it, his arms folded across his chest as the two guards strapped the guy in the blue jumpsuit into the metal chair. They pulled his arms taut across the armrests and tied them down. They secured his feet against the base and his back against the rear mass of the chair. His head hung limp on his neck. The guards left and shut the door behind them.

Bill came forward and produced a vial from his pocket. He popped the top and stuck it under the jumpsuited guy's nose. The guy's neck jerked, and he tried to lurch forward. Bill took a half-step back as the guy got his bearings. He looked up at Bill.

"Surprised?" asked Bill.

The other guy looked down and spat on the floor. A speck of red colored the spit pink. Bill held out a finger at the guy.

"What's that say there on your suit? What does that say?"

"You can read it," said the guy, his voice hoarse and thin, but still imbued with a shade of confidence, conviction.

"I want to hear you say it," said Bill.

"Crane," said the guy.

"So they call you Crane?"

"That's my parents' name, at least," said Crane.

"Your parents, huh? I thought rogues didn't have parents."

"A biological necessity," said Crane.

"How are they, your parents? They know you're up to your neck in shit?"

"Fuck you," said Crane, no threat in his tone, just words.

Bill came forward and gripped Crane's chin with his gloved hand. He lifted the chin and brought Crane's face up into the light.

"You got my name and that's all you get," said Crane.

"Oh, come on, you give yourself too much credit," said Bill. "Aren't rogues supposed to be the strong, silent types? Aren't you supposed to keep your trap shut? You've blown that already."

Crane looked to his left, at the wall-length mirror. His eyes searched its surface.

"So you've got a buddy back there?"

"Maybe," said Bill.

"I know the drill," said Crane. "Which one of you is the bad guy?"

"I am," said Bill.

"Well, let's get it over with," said Crane.

Bill nodded. He cocked his arm and threw a fist across Crane's jaw. Crane recoiled from the impact as much as the restraints allowed. Bill followed through and stepped back. He shook his fist loose. Crane worked his jaw muscles. He spat again, and the spit was red.

"You're pacing yourself?" asked Crane.

"Tough talk from a man who's found himself on Range 13," said Bill. "Hasn't word got out about us yet?"

"Word enough to know that the Eighth Amendment means you're all war criminals."

"More tough talk," said Bill. "This isn't civics class, boyo. And to most of us down here, Geneva is just some town in Switzerland."

Bill he threw another punch. It hit Crane in the ear, mostly. "So tell me, Crane, do you know who shot the President?"

"Nah," said Crane.

"You sure?"

"Pretty sure," said Crane.

"How about all those stadium bombings?"

"Nope."

"The kidnapped Senators?"

"Nothing."

"The CDC heist?"

"Nada."

"Come on. Anything?"

"You know," said Crane. "Keep me here long enough and do what you will, and I'm sure I'll tell you that I was on that grassy knoll, taking shots at JFK. None of these enhanced interrogation techniques work on a long-enough timeline."

"We'll see," said Bill.

"Besides, you'll be the one who has to live with this."

"Oh, I have no problem doing my job," said Bill. "No moral qualms at all."

"Not a religious man?"

"Nope," said Bill. "You?"

"Nah."

"Well, I suppose one more, for good measure," said Bill, and he punched him a third time. He hit part of Crane's nose, and a few drops of blood dripped out.

"Can I get the emotive appeal now?" asked Crane.

"Sure. Why not? End of my watch, anyway."

Bill turned to the window and flashed a thumbs up. He peeled off his surgical gloves as he moved toward the hall and exited.

Smith came out from his door and approached the room's center. Crane looked up and watched him as he passed. Crane's eyes were shrouded behind a curtain of ragged hair that surrounded his head in a brown mane. A few white strands grew by his ears and on his chin, comprising part of the scraggly, patchy beard that covered most of his jawline and neck. All that hair masked Crane's age. He didn't look much older than nineteen.

Smith pulled his sleeve over his hand. He stepped forward and wiped the blood from Crane's nose.

"Thanks," said Crane. "Not because that was a nice, human gesture, but because I hate having to sniffle."

"Hey, come on," said Smith. "Give me a nugget. We're both Americans here."

"For not much longer, chief. That flag sewn on your sleeve won't mean much in a few months."

"Oh? A few months? Three years in and we still seem to have a semblance of a nation."

"A semblance," said Crane. "That's the key phrase."

"Hey, we've already survived one civil war, I'm sure another won't be as hard. The south, though, put up a good fight."

"This isn't just the south," said Crane.

"So what? It's just a bunch of hippies again? Or is it red states versus blue? I thought they said we're actually all purple."

"How'd you vote in the last election?" said Crane.

"That's a secret. I respect the sanctity of the voting booth," said Smith.

"I thought any man of rank had to declare what side of the aisle he'd sit on."

"That wasn't on the job application," said Smith. "This is just a job."

"I bet that's what your average Nazi thought."

"Jesus," said Smith. "Every time anyone under twenty wants to question authority, they bring up the Nazis. Can't we just let it go?"

Crane said nothing. They held a long gaze for a few seconds. Crane blinked and broke it off.

"Come on," said Smith. "Things weren't really so bad before all this, were they? You didn't like all this spy tech, maybe, but everything else was all right. Hell, we were ready to deploy an all-robot army."

"To stomp down on some defenseless countries," said Crane.

"And save our young boys' lives in the process," said Smith. "Forget it. I can't convince you anything I believe, and likewise for you telling me that, oh, boo-hoo, it's so horrible. But at least acknowledge that you can do yourself a solid here. I mean, you probably ran with a crew, right? And there was probably some guy in that crew that you didn't like, right? So why don't you just sell him out and let something slip so he can be here instead of you. I'm not going to lie, though. Sure, even if you give good intel, you'll still be here. But probably for only a year or two, then you'll get shipped to some medium-sec box out west for about twenty years. Every day you'll get three meals, a full night's sleep, and two hours of outdoor rec. I don't even get that. And shit, you'll only be forty when you get out. These days, that's young. Forty is the new twenty, I hear. And if you guys win, it'll be a great country, probably. And if you lose, it'll go back to how it used to be. So what do you say?"

"No," said Crane.

"Come on."

"No," said Crane.

"Please?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

# YEAR FOUR

## That Goddamn Bridge

The image from the high ground: the long slope of the river and its valley; a clear blue summer sky overhead and the green trees and green marshland; a few tufts of marshmallow clouds that drifted lazily in front of a bright, cheery sun; and the distance ahead, rising past the valley toward the slow climb of the earth, heading out all the way into the haze of the horizon.

Paul never saw that anymore. He kept his eyes forward, his perception sharp and alert. He kept his eyes on the three lanes of road ahead, the white dividing lines dim but still visible as the grey stretch curved and sank. The median, on his left, bore ragged black scratches. Mounds of dirt and gravel collected on the shoulder, along with bits of blown tires.

On the approach across the high grounds, the freeway serviced all its usual exits. Most of the overpasses were closed off or blown clear away. Some stray smoke hung in the morning air from what was burning nearby, some ruined schools or churches or houses or whatever. But the road was clear, and the road was open.

So was the bridge. The road sank toward the river, but it was kept aloft by concrete cylinders plunged into the water and soft earth below. The freeway curved along a gentle contour, and then it passed beneath the steel skeleton of the bridge. The bridge itself seemed to have no explicit purpose. The road seemed fine without it. But it was still there, its narrow beams and trusses forming a semicircle of red metal that encased the road while blocking little of the sky and the sun. At midday, only a few thin shadows were cast onto the grey stretch below.

Paul took his foot off the accelerator as he coasted past the last exit and toward the precipice, where the high grounds began to sink toward the river valley. The view ahead extended several miles, and his car was the lone car in sight. He read it as a bad omen, though each morning brought a different pattern, and each had its own ill boding. A rabbit's foot keychain hung from his rearview mirror. He rubbed it with his thumb and forefinger. He mouthed a prayer under his breath. He cracked the driver-side window. He turned down the radio, and he pressed down on the gas.

The car accelerated. He gained speed on the downward slope. A stream of air rushed into the vehicle, and he listened to the sound of his tires rolling along the unbroken asphalt. They gave no indication of struggle. He kept his foot weighed down. He passed the threshold of the solid ground and drove out over the water. He kept his eyes forward, though in his periphery he saw a dull grey spike of concrete a mile to the west, and it nagged at his attention.

The road curved, and he passed under the red shell of the bridge. A sharp hiss passed over the hood of his car. Paul jerked the wheel left, gentle enough to maintain his speed, but hard enough to skew his vector. Another round came in. It glanced off the hood of the car and gave a brief spark. Paul put his foot to the ground. The car wouldn't go any faster. Paul tapped his left foot on the rubber pad next to the brake. He drummed his fingers on the wheel. He ducked a little lower in his seat, but not too low to mask his view of the stretch ahead. A third shot came in at a shallow angle and impacted the median. Paul held his breath.

He cleared the shadow of the bridge, and in a few moments, the road returned to solid ground, and the image of the river faded behind.

A smile formed on Paul's lips. It was little more than reflex, an involuntary reaction to the margins of his survival. It brought no thrill, no stray tingle in his limbs. He felt only a throb in his stomach, accompanied by a chalky taste on his tongue, like he had swallowed a bag full of gravel. But the bridge passed behind, and he sat upright in his seat, and he turned the radio up, and he took one hand off the wheel to grab the half-spilled coffee in the cupholder.

He parked in the office lot and straightened his tie. He left the car, walked through the entrance, nodded at the front-desk guard, and went up to his floor. He sat at his desk, turned on his screen, and went through the pile of work in his inbox. Some muzak droned at a low volume from the nearby cubes. Co-workers, mostly guys around the same age as Paul and dressed the same as Paul, passed at their usual times and congregated in the usual areas. They kept most of their idle chatter to a polite minimum and a quiet volume, and they talked at a mid-range monotone that simulated interest.

"Did you see the prices this morning? They're giving it away. Eight fifty-three a gallon."

"Fucking hell. I filled up for ten twenty-two yesterday."

Paul worked through lunch, and most of his co-workers did likewise. They were all used to eating less. The boss, a few decades older than everyone, made his rounds. He glanced over Paul's shoulder at the work on the screen.

"Good work, Paul."

"Thanks, boss."

Paul kept an eye on his watch. Once four o'clock passed, and once the early comers started filing out, his glances increased in frequency.

"Whew. Thought the hour'd never come," said one of the co-workers as he strode past.

"Later, Paul."

"Yeah. See you," said Paul.

He finished the rest of the work, but all he could think about was the bridge. Five o'clock came and he put everything aside. He stood automatically and walked a straight line to the exit. He fished his keys from his pocket and unlocked his car door. He sat down, turned on the ignition, and pulled out of the lot.

*This is it, he thought. No chance otherwise. It'll happen tonight, and then I won't have to worry about it.*

He retraced the same route out of the city and into the bare stretch of the county. An impromptu detour routed traffic along a different, farther bearing. Men in white spacesuits waved a line of cars away with their fat, gloved hands. A sign stood next to all the traffic cones, that twirly red biohazard logo that warned of horrible radiant mutation beyond. Paul drove around the perimeter, and the dread gained momentum. The path eventually rejoined its usual route, and once he merged onto the freeway, and once he crossed the near miles, the high ground ended and dipped toward the river valley. The sun was gone and the moon was hidden in the brown sky, but under the yellow haze of the streetlights, he saw the red shell of the bridge.

A few cars drove at the same speed in the adjacent lanes. Paul glanced at their drivers, and they all shared a similar posture: all hunched forward, all rigid, their hands like claws on the wheel, none daring to blink. Ahead, traffic funneled into the righthand lane, the rest blocked off by big armored trucks painted in military colors. Paul drove past the convoy, and through the space between the vehicles, he saw the wreck pulled over to the lefthand lane. Three cars had been reduced to a chunk of intertwined metal, all the paint stripped, their hulls all burnt out. Towed to the side was a long strip the length of all three lanes, a row of spikes sticking from its upper edge. A line of military men directed the traffic forward, waving with one hand and gripping their assault rifles with the other.

Paul reached the end of the blockade and accelerated up the final stretch.

He came home and had his first drink before he even set down his bag. He had a few more before he was fully undressed. He hurried between each act, allowing himself no idle time. He turned on the TV and the radio and turned up the volume so they drowned out each other, broadcasting a mishmash of sound and images that washed over the entirety of his apartment's interior. He stood up and watched a few minutes of the news until the signal flickered out and died, and he didn't sit down until he was on his fifth drink.

He put his bag in the farthest room from sight. He knew the path his thoughts tried to chase, and he disrupted it whenever his concentration wandered. Soon enough his balance was off, and when he managed to get to his bed, his thoughts were too soggy to worry about too much.

Then he woke up and repeated the whole thing.

He came to the bridge and stepped hard on the gas. He hugged the curves and made good time. No stray rounds came in, and no spike strips or concertina wire obstructed the lanes. He cleared the river valley but he already began his countdown until five.

Work, and all automatic thought that followed:

"And then the boss was all like, 'Johnson! I want your *gun* and your *badge, on my desk.*'

And then Johnson was all, 'But... I don't even have a badge... or a gun... and you don't even have a desk.' And then the boss was all, 'Dammit, Johnson! You're way out of line... *for the last time!*' Man, I love that show!"

"Yeah," said Paul.

Then, not much later:

"Five o'clock, Paul. Time to head out."

"Yeah."

The routine of each day was identical, but each time the bridge was different. If it wasn't sporadic gunfire from some phantom source, it was a spike strip or the wire. If it wasn't the wire, it was some not-so-random accident, it was a lazily-aimed RPG, with the aftermath forcing traffic to back up to a crawl, and then there was that paralyzing dread that accompanied a slow passage across the bridge, or a full-on quarantine stop while the bomb trucks came in and a helicopter swooped low overhead as the patrol boats checked the support cylinders for explosives, or sometimes it was completely random, like that icy goo spilled all over the road, so slippery that cars fishtailed and spun full rotations before the rest could figure out how to roll along without slowing too much to let the tension get the best of them.

"Hey, Paul?"

Paul flinched at his desk. A co-worker loomed over to him.

"You don't look so hot, buddy."

"Oh, it's nothing," said Paul.

"Yeah?"

"That goddamn bridge," he said.

"You got a gun?"

"Of course."

"Then man up. If you get killed, you get killed. It happens."

"Do you commute from the north?"

"Nah. I take the rail."

"Forget it, then," said Paul. "You wouldn't understand."

"Sure. Hey, did you see the game last night?"

And the drive home: no cars on the bridge except for one, pulled over to the lefthand side, its front end crumpled against the concrete barrier. Paul veered to the right. A man leapt from the wreckage and waved wildly at Paul's passing car. A dark red blotch covered most of the man's white shirt. He shouted something toward Paul but Paul kept driving.

"You're on your own, buddy!" Paul called out the crack in the window.

Another quiet crossing in the morning. It only added to the paranoia of the eventual night pass.

"So then she started talking to me about, like, seasons and shit," said a co-worker, "and then I was all like, 'Bitch, you don't know me!'"

"That's crazy, man, that's crazy. Just real crazy."

"But she was *hot*, though."

"She have any hot friends?"

"Of course. Hot girls always have hot friends. It's like a rule of physics. The Law of Conservation of Hot Friends or something."

"True. True."

"Hey, Paul?"

Paul turned to the three other guys, all clustered around the watercooler a few paces from his desk.

"Hey, Paul, you wanna come out with us tonight?"

"Nah."

"You hanging out with cooler kids?"

"Nah. I'm just not in the mood."

"Whatever, man. You'd rather drink at home than at a bar?"

"Yeah."

"Your call."

Then the day's end, most leaving earlier than usual. Desk lights turned off one by one until most of the interior was dark.

"Hey, Paul, still here at five on a Friday?"

"I guess I lost track of the time."

Down the stairs, back in his car, and out on the roads. He drove past fresh rubble, only a few government vehicles outside before they taped off the zone. Some guys with surgical gloves

carted out bodies from the front and threw them in the back of the big vans. Miles farther, there weren't any cars on the bridge, and Paul crossed without incident. It added to a relative relief: the weekend, a stretch of two days filled only with idle time.

The phone rang.

"Hey, Paul, where you at?"

"The apartment. You?"

"Me and Will are going to some house party. A little business on the side, but nothing that requires you. You in?"

"Where's it at?"

"Easthaven.

"Fuck that shit. I'm not crossing any bridges on the weekend."

"Fine. Your loss. You can't just hide forever, you know."

"For as long as I can, I will."

The Monday drive: a swarm of helicopters hovered just west of the bridge, taking turns firing missiles at the grey spike of the old power plant. The missiles impacted with a little red fireball that disappeared in an instant. Once they pulled off to refuel, there was no visible change on the tower. But no stray rounds came in on the bridge, and the car went unscathed.

"How much do you guys tip? Like, really, how much?"

"Fifteen percent."

"Twenty."

"Twenty? Are you insane?"

"I used to wait tables. It sucks. They appreciate it."

"Yeah, I get it. But twenty? Fuck twenty."

"Hey, guys, keep the language to a minimum. This is a government office."

"Sorry, boss."

"Yeah. Sorry."

The boss passed down the corridor. The guys waited until he was out of earshot.

"Old motherfucker."

"Not many of them still around."

"I have to give him credit, though, for not jumping ship yet."

"Well, it won't be much longer. I hear the order's coming through."

"The order?" asked Paul as he turned from his desk. "When?"

"Soon. Apparently all the other soft targets have been hit, and we're the last. Maybe we won't get notice today, but probably by the end of the week."

"It's Tuesday. They could hit by then."

"Well, then tell your rogue friends to ease off. This is a government shop. *Someone* has to fill the weekly quota, threat or no threat."

"Yeah. Whatever. Fuck it."

"Yeah. Fuck it. If it happens, my ghost will haunt the shit out of whatever's rebuilt here."

Then Wednesday on the bridge, and Thursday, and Friday. Paul hit some scrap and blew a tire. His car limped the rest of the way. Other cars drove past and pointed urgently at the damage. Paul waved them by, and he pulled off at the highgrounds to swap out the flat.

"You're late, Paul."

"No excuse, boss."

"Doesn't matter. There's a memo that just came through MuniNet."

"What about?"

"Just read it. I still want a solid day's work, but then you're done. Central will still mail checks for a few more months until they get bombed or something."

"Sorry to hear, boss."

"Don't feel sorry. It's not your fault. I've been expecting this for a year."

Paul sat down at his desk. The crew circled around the watercooler.

"Don't even bother reading it, chief."

"Oh?" asked Paul.

"It's like summer vacation up in here, but paid in full."

Two guys slapped each other a high five.

"While Uncle Sam's still got some deep pockets, he's taking pity on us lowly civil servants."

"Hell yeah."

"If I can swing the clearance, I'm going on vacation."

"Good luck with that bit."

"Hey, I'd prefer a fiery crash in a private jet than starving to death in a breadline."

"Come on, Paul, what do you say? Go out for a drink with us one last time?"

"You guys all live around here, right?" asked Paul.

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

"I can't get sloshed and drive home over the bridge."

"Oh, come on."

"I don't think so."

"Come on!"

"Thanks for the offer, but—"

"But you're playing it safe!"

"I am," said Paul, "from here on out, maybe. I'm getting tired of all this."

"Whatever. Your loss."

All throughout the day, co-workers ducked out early, carrying bulky boxes crammed with their personal effects and whatever they swiped from the supply cabinet. They cackled fiendishly, like they were getting away with something far more sinister than compulsory paid leave. Paul cleared out his inbox and finished at five. He turned off his screen, double-checked all his empty drawers, and left. He took one last look at the office and saw only one light still lit: the corner office with the glassed-in walls, behind which sat the boss in his big chair, his feet up on the desk and a silver flask in hand.

Paul loaded his car and drove down the near streets. The sun hung low in the sky, casting a ruddy haze in the west, all twilight colors that turned the clouds all pink and bloody. He leaned back in his seat and found no resistance on his usual route. He merged onto the freeway. The bridge came up ahead but he kept only one hand on the wheel. Traffic slowed but he saw no wreck, no visible hold-up, and he thought nothing of it.

Near the middle of the bridge he looked out to the west. The shimmering disc of the sun was partly blocked by the old power plant's main tower. It cast the spike in perfect silhouette, and as an abstract black form against the red sky, its shape had no menace. A flock of birds flew past the vista. Paul took a deep breath and smiled.

The bridge groaned. The span quaked. A fissure cut through the cement and swallowed up the cars surrounding. Paul car's remained level on the stretch of road, and only his view through the windshield shifted as his seatbelt held him in position, one hand still loose on the wheel as he saw the dark water rush forward and claim the metal shell of the car.

# YEAR FIVE

## Modern Mechanized Warfare

Most men over the rank of Captain were at least six feet tall. The Colonel wasn't. Most of the higher-ups had blue eyes and a full head of hair, though most of it had gone grey. The Colonel had little brown eyes, and though his hair was dark - nearly black - it didn't cover the full dome of his bald head. He did, however, sport a finely-groomed mustache, its corners drooping just below his mouth. And he wore big dark sunglasses, their lenses a perfect mirror, through which it was impossible to see the Colonel's eyes.

The Colonel kicked at the dirt and gave some groans and grunts and "hoorahs" and "hooahs" before he began his talk proper. The Colonel talked in a gruff tone which chewed the line between consonants and vowels and made all the words mush together. His accent wasn't quite Northern, but not quite Southern. It was somewhere in the nether-regions of dialect. He probably learned to talk that way from watching a lot of war movies. He probably thought it was what the troops expected.

Because of all this, a lot of the men made unfair assumptions about the Colonel. Most of them were true.

"Gentlemen," said the Colonel, loud and crisp, as he tried to give his voice a deep boom that came off as a bark. "That is, I should hope to call you gentlemen. Because that is what we are. The best of the best! The top tier! The elites' elites! You're cold-blooded, meat-eating killers! You're highly-trained, one-man war machines! *But*, gentlemen, we are part of a formal fighting force. You may not be wearing your dress blues right now, but in spirit, you're always wearing your best duds. We're out here to kick some ass and take some names, sure, but we have some rules. You all know your ROEs, sure, but I consider that only half of what's necessary to maintain maximum combat effectiveness out in this combat zone.

"You, gentlemen," said the Colonel, "should be as familiar with field hygiene regulations as you should be with your engage-rules. I'm talking about personal grooming, gentlemen."

The Colonel walked along the line. The men, in uniform, in a formation three lines deep, stood at attention. The stillness and rigidity of their posture was a disconnect from their appearance: all of them ragged and dusty; the tan-colored collars and underarms of their uniforms dark with sweat; the stubble on their chins nearly indistinguishable from all the dirt and dust and grime and bits of blown sand; their cheeks worn and hollow; their eyes full-on bloodshot; clumps of tar on their boots; and all of them reeked of a burnt-out gasoline smell.

The Colonel leaned in close to all the men and read the patches sewn on their front pockets.

Thompson.

Johnson.

Wilson.

Stevenson.

Jackson.

"You, soldier, what's your name?"

"Anderson, sir."

"And why is that not on your uniform, soldier?"

"New uniform, sir," said Anderson.

"It doesn't look new, soldier."

"Battlefield conditions, sir."

"And what happened to the old one, soldier? You take some shrap? Step on a mine?"

Dirty it up good with the guts of the enemy?"

"I had a bloody nose, sir."

The Colonel nodded to himself as he stepped back and continued along the line.

Anderson held his posture and stared straight ahead. The flat desert plain stretched for endless miles toward the far horizon. The air shimmered in the midday heat.

Sweat poured down Anderson's face. His hands itched. The sweat ran into his eyes and stung. The Colonel rounded the foundation and walked toward the back. Anderson squeezed his eyelids closed. His eyes burned worse.

"There's no moving at attention, soldier!" the Colonel barked near the back.

"Sorry, sir. No excuse, sir."

"You're damn right," said the Colonel. "I'm shocked, gentlemen. Honestly, I'm shocked. For a unit with one of the best combat records in this theater, I see a definite lack of discipline. I see unshaven faces! I see haircuts that wouldn't pass regulation! If I were a man to issue rash judgments and harsh words - and I, thankfully, am not such a man - I'd say you look no different than rogues! Scruffians! Slugs! Or, god forbid, the enemy! I simply do not understand! You clean your guns every day. You check your equipment. You keep it all in fine shape. Why, then, not follow the same examples for yourselves?"

He finished his well-timed walk around their perimeter and returned to the front.

"New directive, gentlemen. Every man here will shave and shower daily. Uniforms will be laundered - by hand, if necessary - weekly. This will be enforced by your COs, and with random inspection by my subordinates. You may think that you are only a small part of this high-tech fight, that the man on the ground means little anymore. False! You're the kind of upstanding, rational gentlemen that can fight this enemy! By god's will, you'll steer these war machines to achieve victory! You're men of strong moral fiber in an historical conflict that tests your will far more than any generation prior!"

Anderson waited until the Colonel turned his gaze toward the opposite side of the formation, and then he blinked rapidly. As soon as he reopened his eyes, the sweat poured back in. He felt it run from his underarms and down his back, not cool and refreshing but warm and sticky.

"You may worry about things back home, sure," said the Colonel, lowering his tone of voice, "but we have men as good as you defending the homeland. Hell, it's not like we haven't fought wars on multiple fronts before, eh? When we brought the fight to the Krauts and the Japs? To the Ruskys and the Chinks? We've been to this desert before for the same! And now that we're fighting a high-tech fight, we have more toys than ever before to crush the enemy. We can slam-dunk this fight! We won't need a photo finish! We'll hit a home run! And then we'll—!"

One of the Colonel's aides scurried forward from the landing pad and gently tapped on the Colonel's shoulder. The Colonel gave the aide his ear, and the aide whispered into it.

"Shoot," said the Colonel. "Well, gentlemen, I have a pressing engagement."

The Colonel followed the aide to the helicopter. The men in formation offered a crisp, unison salute. The Colonel turned, walked backward a few paces, and returned the gesture.

"So remember, men, to get rid of those beards, and keep those duds clean and pressed. Dismissed."

The Colonel boarded the helicopter and his escorts followed. The rotors chopped and blurred once they reached full speed. The craft rose from the ground, blowing dust and dirt all around. The unmanned drones followed suit, floating up from the sand and hovering in the bigger craft's shadow. The men, still at attention, closed their eyes and sealed their lips, bearing the brunt of the rotor wash until the helo turned and darted off. The active camo engaged and its shape dissolved into a clear glimmer, though it retained its dull whine. The noise faded once it passed over the base, and then it was gone.

"At ease," said the Lieutenant.

All their shoulders slumped, and they all reverted to a common slouch. They vigorously scratched their backs and bent at the waist, letting the sweat drip off their hair. They uncapped their canteens and poured warm water over their faces.

"Goddamn," said one, "goddamn..."

"Sorry about that, guys," said the Lieutenant. "Command sprung it on me this morning."

"Strong moral fiber?" said one of the men. "Isn't that in breakfast cereal?"

They all went back toward the base and, once inside the perimeter, half went toward the motor pool and the other half went toward their conexas.

"Command!" scoffed Johnson. "Should've told him that all of us already shower and shave every morning."

"Yeah. And I don't think his 'stache is regulation, either."

"Give the guy a break. He's only towing the company line for some fuddy-duddy, rear-echelon general."

"Shit is fucked," said Jackson. "When I get home, I might join up with the rogues out of spite. I hear they like vets."

"I hear they're winning."

"What do you think, Anderson?"

Anderson kept his eyes on the ground, stepping lightly over metal scraps and little divots carved out by old arty and mortars.

"I don't know," said Anderson. "It's easy to follow orders."

"That sounds like lifer-talk," said Jackson.

"Maybe," said Anderson. "There's not much else left to do back home, is there?"

# YEAR SIX

## Death Messages

Winter: a stark white, rolling landscape. On bright days, the glare would mask all semblance of topography, and the hills looked no different than the flat fields. The earth had only two colors: the silver-blue of the clear sky, and the colorless white below, more blinding than the sun.

A farmhouse stood near a grove of snow-covered trees. Servicing its entrance was a dirt drive that wound out a few miles where it met a gravel road. But both were snowed under, and the only tracks on its surface were hooves and paws.

"I think that might be too much. Isn't that too much?"

The director stepped away and Jim had a clear view of the mirror. An unshaded bulb hung on a cord overhead, and it cast an uneven shadow on Jim's face, reducing his eyes to hollow pits beneath his brow. His face was pale, but his lips were bright red.

"This looks fucking ridiculous," said Jim.

"I'll powder it down, then," said the director.

Jim rubbed it off with his sleeve. The director came in with a compact and made a move for Jim's face. Jim moved aside and held up his hands in defense.

"Forget it," he said.

"You're right," said the director. "We dub the master a few times, anyway, so the color gets all messed up."

"Then why bother in the first place?" asked Jim.

The director gave a half-shrug.

"The more it's dubbed, the more it seems like it's getting passed around. You know, like people really care about it."

"Whatever, man. If you say so. You're the professional. When's go-time?"

"Two minutes. I need to check the lights."

"You need some help?"

The director shook his head.

"Just go over the script a few times."

"All right," said Jim.

The director disappeared around the corner. Jim took the loose pages off the countertop and glanced their contents. The font was too small. There was too much type on each page. He brought the sheet near his face and squinted to read the tiny words. It looked more like a map, each chunk of text separated by blank space, connected by a network of interconnecting red lines, blue lines, black lines.

"All right, let's do this," called the director from around the corner.

Jim went into the adjacent room. A maze of lights, c-stands and flags surrounded a plain grey background next to an array of rolled-up backdrops. He stepped lightly over cables as the director tightened the screw on the overhead mic stand. The director took his place behind the camera and jiggled the lens control.

"Front and center, chief," said the director.

Jim slipped through the grip equipment. He aligned his feet on the t-shaped tape-mark on the floor. Ahead, the director stood behind the camera at a distance of fifteen feet. A long lens protruded from the camera body, its end aimed like a gun. The lights were hot and bright on Jim's face, but in the reflection of the lens glass, they were small and distant, little flecks of white in a sea of indistinct, distorted black shapes.

"You ready?" asked the director.

"Make me look young," said Jim.

Jim lowered the script and held it below his waist. He straightened himself to the camera and shifted his weight.

"Look natural," said the director.

"I'm trying."

"Try harder."

Jim took a comfortable stance, with most of the weight on his back foot.

"No pressure," said the director.

"Yeah," said Jim.

"Okay, and..." the director said, poised behind the lens, "action."

The lights grew a little brighter. A red dot appeared on the front of the camera.

"Hello," said Jim as he stared directly into the lens. "By now, you may have heard rumors of my death or capture. You may have even been shown photographs or videotape of said death or capture. These are fabrications and--"

"Cut!"

The director stepped out from behind the lens. He scratched behind his ears.

"The fuck's the problem?" asked Jim.

"That sounds way too scripted."

"But it *is*. It *is* scripted."

"Nah. The whole repeating of 'said death or capture' doesn't sell."

"What would?"

The director shrugged.

"I don't know. I'm not a writer."

"Neither am I. I'm just a face," said Jim.

"Well, let's figure something out on the fly," said the director. "Go."

"Give me some time to write something else," said Jim.

"No. Just improvise. Go."

"But can't I just—"

"Go! Action rehearsal!" said the director, and he peered through his viewfinder. The lights remained dimmed. There was no red dot.

"Greetings," said Jim. "By now, you may have heard rumors of my death or capture. You may have even seen pictures or video, but the information I'll tell you in this message proves that I'm still alive and well and am closely following current civilian-military affairs. I think that--"

"Cut!" said the director.

"How was that?"

"Good, except for the 'greetings' at the head. That sounds like an alien who just touched down on the White House lawn."

"Or what's left of it."

"Go back to the script," said the director, "but take out part of that second sentence with what you just said."

"Check."

"Okay," said the director. "I'm shooting this to the card. Are you ready?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, and... action."

"Hello, friends and neighbors," said Jim. "By now, you may have heard rumors of my death or capture. You may have even seen pictures or video to prove this. These are fabrications. They are the signs of a desperate attempt by our former government to undermine our influence. In truth, my death would mean nothing. I am but one man in support of our cause. But regardless, I will prove that I am still alive by giving commentary on the following current events."

"Cut," said the director. "Good."

"All right. What's next?"

The director looked at his clipboard and traced his finger along its perimeter.

"Let's do the list of wars," said the director

"Just run through each one as a full read-through?"

"Nah. That would take too long. Just start with the prompt and go through the countries. Put a pause between each. I'll stitch it together in post. I'll run a dub line over your mouth and pop out one word for another."

"All right," said Jim. "Cool."

"You ready?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, and... action."

The red light, and:

"Our former government has continued to hold our military hostage, tying it up in a costly series of unlawful, unsanctioned police actions in Afghanistan," said Jim. He paused, then said, "Iraq," then he paused and said, "Iran. Syria. Egypt. Pakistan. Syria. Turkey," then he blanked and stared at the lens. "Shit, I'm rusty on my geography."

"And you said Syria twice. But it's okay," said the director, hidden behind the camera. "You can look at the script and keep going. I'll edit this out."

"India," said Jim. "China. Japan. North Korea. South Korea. Korea. Russia. The Soviet Union. Germany. France. Great Britain. The United Kingdom. England."

"All right," said the director.

"That's all on the script," said Jim.

"Just add a few for safety."

"Okay," said Jim. "Mexico. Brazil. Cuba. Chile. Venezuela. South America. Canada."

"Canada?" asked the director.

"Why not?"

"Cut. Okay. You good right now? Something to drink?"

"I'll have a water."

The director got him a bottled water.

"Let's take five," said the director. "I'll load the cards. Step out from under the lights."

"Yeah."

"But don't get too comfortable. We're not out of the woods yet."

The director pulled the cards from the camera. Jim slipped through the gap of flags and into the open interior of the basement. The director went to his corner, boxed in with computing equipment. The screens faced the wall, and when the director booted up the machines, they all lit up and cast a blue haze on the director's face. A soothing chorus of windchimes played out from the speakers as the director clicked through the loading prompts. Jim came a few steps closer.

"You're not allowed to look at this," said the director. "The less you know, the better."

"Come on," said Jim. "You're just a hired hand. What do you care if I endanger myself or not?"

"Because I'm paid for a very specific job," said the director. "I'm a professional."

Jim stood on the opposite side of the director's array. Some satellite photos were taped up on the near wall, some red marker drawn on their surface. In the center of the largest picture, he saw the ragged shape of the country, green and brown and some blotches of murky blue. There were no borders drawn, no labels for cities. The countries to the north and south collided with no concern for the exact, imaginary boundary.

To the north, past the border proper, most of the land was covered in green.

"What are those, forests?" asked Jim.

The director looked up from his workstation.

"Probably. A few secret prisons, too, maybe."

"You're not sure?"

"If I was, they wouldn't be secret," said the director.

"I don't see many cities."

"Not many cities in the north."

"You could probably walk around up there for years and not see anyone," said Jim.

"And you could get lost and never find your way out."

"Well, the sun rises in the east," said Jim. "Just keep going south."

"And walk for years," said the director. "With what? A knife and a jacket? That's a summer picture, chief. You don't want to see what it looks like in the winter."

"Probably just whiter," said Jim.

"And cold as hell. All right, I'll be done with the cards in a minute. Go shave off that beard and put on the second outfit. We'll simulate some years for you."

Jim went around the corner and shaved in the sink. He kept a blonde mustache on his upper lip, but the hair was so light that it didn't register at any sizeable distance. He trimmed some of the hair that covered his eyes. He put on a dusty grey coat, and then he went back into the other room.

"Looking sharp," said the director.

"What else's on the docket?" asked Jim.

The director consulted his clipboard.

"Let's see. Consolidation Day. Freedom Day. The half-hearted attempts at ethnic cleansing that you, obviously, don't condone."

"You mean 'we,'" said Jim.

"Yeah, sure. And then we can cap it off with some stock outros that we've already shot."

"Good. Only so many times a day I can mention my own death without starting to believe it."

"There's not much to believe," said the director.

"So that it's, huh? I'm going to get popped?" said Jim.

"Eventually. Probably."

"This is all real, though, right?" asked Jim. "Like, this isn't just some fake setup and you were actually hired to kill me?"

"You've seen too many movies," said the director. "But if you want to get it done, I could take you out back."

"Nah. But it's done deal, I guess. Right?"

"Unless you want to live here the rest of your life. Do you want that?"

"I hadn't thought about it. I just don't want to end up in Central Rouge."

"Right."

"Well," said Jim, turning back toward the setup, "let's get this over with."

# YEAR SEVEN

## Keys

The dog jumped up on the couch and pressed its nose against the window. She saw the backyard: a fenced-in square of lumpy grass, most of it ankle-high, bent at odd angles from the wind. Beyond was a stretch of thin woods. Through the trees, the dog saw the dark shapes of farther houses.

Will came up from the basement. The dog jumped off the couch and waited by the door. The flap at the bottom of the door was taped shut, then blocked by a nailed-up sheet of plywood, then covered by a blanket and another wad of silver tape.

"No," said Will, and the dog stood her ground. The dog tilted her head and looked up at Will with wet eyes. "No," said Will, and as he passed through the room to the kitchen, the dog followed.

The dog watched him eat. Will sat on a stool, eating over the sink so the crumbs went down the drain. The dog sat upright, but her hind legs kept slipping back on the hardwood floor. The dog kept her eyes on the sandwich in Will's hand, and at random moments during the process, the dog renewed her vigor and came a little closer, held its rigid sit a little longer. When Will finished, a puddle of canine saliva had pooled on the floor. Will rubbed his foot over it, and his sock absorbed it.

Will went into the living room and the dog followed. He went upstairs to his bedroom and the dog followed. He slid around the bathroom door and closed it, leaving the dog in the hall. He turned on the fan so the dog wouldn't hear, and after he washed his hands and opened the door, the dog sat outside, in the same position as the few minutes prior. When Will went back downstairs, sat on the couch, and picked up an old yellowed book, the dog took a toy bone from her basket and came over to Will. She held it in her teeth and stood there, and when Will looked up from the text and over at the dog, the dog gave a few wags of her tail. Will pulled the toy from the dog's mouth and hurled it across the main level. The dog pivoted and lurched forward, scrambling across the hardwood floor to retrieve it. The dog came back and set it down at Will's feet.

"No," said Will, and the dog stayed in its place. "No," he repeated, and the dog laid down. He read for a while and listened to the silence. The dog sighed. Will sighed. The dog jerked her head up. She growled. Will set down the book, picked up his gun, and stalked to the front door.

"Stay," said Will, and the dog stayed.

Will peered through the crack in the curtains. He looked out at the shaggy front lawn, the grey stretch of road, and the yard of the house opposite, its exterior intact, its own windows closed and curtains drawn. Will held his mouth open, drawing short, shallow breaths. He heard a ragged chug on the near street, and an old blue car rolled into view. Will couldn't see the driver; the passenger-side window was taped up with cardboard. The car idled loudly, and a black plume trailed from its exhaust pipe.

"Keep driving, motherfucker," Will whispered.

The car slowed as it passed the houses, but it kept forward momentum. The car coughed, and it accelerated forward. Will held his position and watched it disappear from his narrow field of view. Then the sound faded, and he heard only the pull of the dull wind and the chirp of hidden birds. A few squirrels chased each other up the tree in the front yard.

Will stepped back from the window. The dog padded over. She had the toy bone in her mouth.

Once the sun started to go down, Will opened up the kitchen cupboard and dragged out the billion-pound bag of dog food. The dog went over to her bowl and waited. Will poured some in, and the dog sat patiently. Will took a second bowl and went over to the sink. He turned on the tap, and after the water gave a few hesitant spurts, the stream became constant and clear once a few bits of rust-colored liquid came out. Will filled the bowl and set it down by the food. The dog looked up at him with a cocked head.

"Okay," said Will, gesturing wildly at the food.

The dog lowered her snout and ate. Will shuffled to the fridge and opened it. The interior light clicked on and displayed the contents: a few dozen unmarked bottles of water and some condiments. He shut the door and opened the icebox. Inside: a stack of steaks, assorted raw meats, a few pints of blood, and two plastic jugs of clear liquid. A piece of masking tape was wrapped around each. One was labeled "vod" in black marker, the other "gin."

Will clenched his fist and raised it in the air.

"My kingdom for some fresh fruit!" he bellowed.

The dog snapped to attention and looked over at Will. Will lowered his fist. The dog resumed her eating. Will grilled a steak down in the basement and ate in the kitchen, and once they were both finished, the dog went over to the door, then onto her roost on the couch, and back to the door again.

"Fine," said Will.

Will bent down and took off the dog's collar.

"If anyone asks," said Will, "you're a wild puppy. You don't belong to anyone around here."

He fished his keys out of his pocket and unlocked the door. At the sound of the jingle-jangling, the dog went nuts. She pushed closer, and Will had to force the dog aside as he pried open the door. He pulled out the screen, and the dog sprang out onto the deck and leapt off its far edge. She ran a circle around the central tree, and then she pissed and shit in her favorite spots. She then rooted around with her nose in the grass, catching up on all the smells she had missed in the past day.

All the while, Will kept his eyes on the woods and the far houses. Only the trees moved in the wind. The dog kept to itself, and she gave no indication of sensing any unwanted presence. After a few minutes, Will whistled a low tone. The dog turned mid-stride, one of her front paws frozen in the air. Will repeated the tone, and the dog returned inside. Will slid the door shut, pulled out his keys and locked it. The dog lingered by the door even after Will put her collar back on and even after Will left the room. The dog jumped onto the couch and stood on her roost. She watched the sun set and the light fade from the sky. When the leaves looked black on their branches, Will whistled and the dog went upstairs.

Will brushed his teeth and the dog entered the dark cave of her kennel in the corner of the bedroom. Will came back in, drank a glass of water, closed the door of the kennel, turned on the fan, and stumbled toward his bed.

In the morning, Will opened his closet and chose a shirt from one of the many hangar-hung shirts. The dog came out of her kennel and stretched. Will selected the rest of his clothes, all folded neatly in the drawers of his dresser. He went into the bathroom, drew aside the shower curtain and pulled on the knobs. A burst of water came out. The pipes groaned. The pressure reduced to a trickle, then nothing at all.

"Fuck it," said Will.

He left the bathroom and there, waiting in the hall, sat the dog. The dog looked up at him and tilted her head.

"What?" asked Will. "I'm a respectable young man. I'm reasonably well-read and well-dressed. I appreciate fine cinema. Why, then, should I not have the self-dignity to find some way to maintain a reasonable appearance?"

The dog gave no response. Will dressed in his room and went downstairs. The dog followed. Will turned on the nearest lightswitch. The overhead lights came on.

"At least that shit still works."

He turned on the television mounted on the living room wall. The current ran through its circuit, and Will flipped through an unchanging pattern of static, only the tiny numbers in the set's corner ascending as he cycled through the dead channels.

"No surprises," said Will.

Five days later, the power went out.

Will shined a flashlight beam in the dusty basement air. He swung it around and it pierced the darkness. Behind him, the light shined on the dog. The dog's eyes turned nearly transparent, each a murky sphere that had an otherworldly glow. Will stuck a few waterbottles in his pockets and some more in a backpack.

"Hey, come here."

He wrangled the dog and strapped the backpack around her like a saddle. The dog squirmed but stayed in place.

"Come on."

The dog followed Will upstairs.

"Not like I was using power anyway. Money.net would trace the shit, right? Not like I have a death wish, right? The hell would I do online? Check sports scores? Stock tips? The weather in some foreign country? Books don't take any power to read, right?"

He reached the top of the stairs.

"Too bad I'm running out of books."

In the kitchen, Will put the waterbottles in the hollow shell of the fridge, the interior of which was still a bit cold. He took some of the steaks from the thawing icebox and brought them down into the basement and the lower cellar. Will put them in the big icebox with all the still-cold dry ice. The dog followed and watched at the door.

"No worries, hey?" he said to the dog. "I've got enough MREs to feed a squad for a year."

He went back upstairs and turned off the flashlight. Some moonbeams came in through the high windows. Will knew the way to the uppermost floor by memory. So did the dog.

The next morning he opened the bathroom and let some of the stray sunlight into the windowless space. He took his electric razor from the drawer and flicked it on. It emitted a weak mechanical buzz. He saw his reflection in the mirror from the half-light of the hall, and he dragged the razor across the shadow of his jaw. He did the same the next day, and the day after, and the day after that. Each time, its hum grew a little weaker, until its inner workings slowed to a crawl, the slow-motion sound of electric death. Will put it back in the drawer and refrained from running his hands through his dirty hair. He stopped looking in the mirror after that.

The dog, sitting in the hall, followed him downstairs. Will washed the dishes in the sink with bottled water. The dog perched on the top of the couch. Will turned and looked, and the dog leapt off and pressed her nose against the door.

"No!" said Will, his voice filled with force and a bit of violence. "It's not safe to go outside!"

The dog tilted her head. She did not shy away or tuck her tail between her legs. She slid to a sit. She looked up at Will for a second, then she cast her gaze down, across the endless expanse of wood floor.

"I'm sorry," said Will, and he turned back to the dishes. "I shouldn't get into a habit of talking to you. But fuck it, right?"

He laughed to himself, but he knew it had no purpose. The dog stayed in place. Will finished, dried his hands, and fished his keys out of his pocket. The little musical clink of metal on metal made the dog spring to her feet. Will unlocked the back door.

"Two minutes," he said to the dog, and the dog rushed outside once the path was clear. Two minutes later, he called the dog back inside, and the dog came. He shut the door and locked it.

That night he took a steak from the cellar and cooked it on the grill in the basement, rigged up to a pipe that snaked out through the foundation and into the woods, where a plume of meat-smelling smoke filtered out into the cool air. He went upstairs to eat it. He took a bottle of water from the hollow interior of the fridge.

"You know what?" Will asked the dog as it ate from its bowl. "I'm sick of water."

He opened up the thawed-out icebox and took the jug labeled "vod." He poured some into a glass and drank it in big gulps. He cut through the burn with big bites of meat. He trimmed off most of the edges of the steak and pushed them to the far side of the plate. The dog kept at her mound of condensed brown pellet-food. Her snout pushed against the bottom of the bowl, held in place on the floor by a rubber mat. When Will was finished, he slid the trimmed meat bits off his plate into the dog's bowl. They were gone very quickly.

"Don't get used to it," said Will. "No tolerance for bad habits."

It didn't take long to get drunk. Before he was too far gone, he took his gun from his belt holster and ejected the clip. He took the round out of the chamber, and he put them all in high places that were hard to reach.

"Because, in case, you know," said Will as he walked around the house, one step shorter than the other, his voice a little loose, "in case I get some urge to kill myself or whatever. Not

gonna happen, though. Because what would I do about you? I couldn't just let you starve in a locked house, would I?"

The dog followed him room to room. Will didn't refill his glass once he emptied its contents. He took the jug and carried it around as he paced the dark rooms.

"All I ever wanted," said Will, "all I ever wanted was to go home every night, get drunk, watch my TV shows, and get laid once in a while. Is that too much to ask? I guess I have one of the four, so I have no reason to complain, right?"

The dog followed him into the kitchen, and Will paced around the central island of countertop in the middle of the space. He thrust both hands into the air. Some of the liquid freed itself from the jug and landed on the floor. The dog licked it up.

"I was supposed to be great!" Will shouted. "I performed exceptionally well on standardized tests!"

The dog finished off the puddle and left only a bit of saliva on the floor.

"I was a great conversationalist!" Will shouted. "I made *jokes*! People *laughed*! And now what?" Will said.

He set down the jug on the countertop. He misjudged the distance, and it collided with the surface harder than expected. Some more liquid came out the top and onto the floor. The dog took care of it.

"You get to be twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-nine, fuck, thirty," said Will, "and if you make enough money, you give up all that fire. So what, right? That's the history of youth for the past hundred years. But now?"

He turned and faced the windows along the back wall. He couldn't see too well, and he only thought he saw a glimpse of the starry night sky, bright without all those brown city lights.

"I'm tired of wanting things," said Will. "That's why we all started it, you know? But I still want things. Maybe my heart's not in it anymore. Whatever *that* means."

Will jiggled the keys in his pocket. The dog rushed for the door.

"No," said Will. "You stay there."

The dog froze in place. Will jammed the key in the lock and turned it. He pulled the door and the screen open. He stepped outside and closed it all behind him. He stood on the deck in his socks. The air was pleasant on his skin, and the wind was cold. It didn't have the tomb-smell of the house, or the dust, or the painted walls. He looked out at the woods even though, from his vantage, it wasn't much different than the view from behind the kitchen window. But he stood up a little straighter, and he breathed deep breaths.

"Yeah," said Will. "Yeah."

He then bent at the waist and promptly vomited.

# YEAR EIGHT

## Colony

We went up and down the halls, checking and rechecking most of the empty rooms, feigning concern over the prospect of leaving something important behind. But there was no real threat, no real need to hurry, and the sun was still high and bright in the sky. We still put a little more spring in our steps, trying to overcome any possible nostalgia by substituting it with urgency. We'd leave when we were sure and ready, but once the order came through to pack up, we decided the sooner, the better.

I tried not to linger too long in the open doorways of darkened classrooms. I rationalized it as a last spot-check, even though half the staff had already gone through their itemized lists and their schedules and taken every last worthwhile possession from the rooms. We still left some worthless things, though, things we wouldn't need, things we couldn't take with us. The chalkboards remained mounted on the front walls of the rooms, most still covered in a dusty, semi-erased scrawl. Blunt sticks of chalk remained on the trays. The desk-chairs were arranged in neat rows. Diagrams and graphs and charts were still taped up on the back walls. The shades were pulled halfway down the windows, and shards of sunlight spilled onto the floor, giving a few spots of glare on the linoleum floors.

"Hey, prof?"

I turned and saw one of my TAs in the near stretch of hall. A third of the overheads were off, and the hall had that last-day-of-school look, all dark and changed just because of a few turned-off lights.

"Yeah?"

"Just wanted to say that we have all your stuff packed up, ready to go."

"Thanks. Any timetable?" I asked.

"Just within the hour," said the TA. "Nothing exact."

"Yeah, I figured," I said.

"Well, if you need me," said the TA, "I'm on the common channel. We're shutting down the high tech, so we're back to basics."

"Good," I said.

The TA turned and left. His steps faded down the hall. Once he was gone, I pulled the door shut and heard the lock click into place. "GEOMETRY" read the plaque on the door, under which was the word written in Russian.

I followed down the hall toward the main campus hub. There, a few more groups of grad students wheeled flatbed carts topped with book-filled boxes. I spied one of the older profs, who leaned against one of the wall-sized windows as he took off his glasses and wiped the lenses on his shirt.

"All packed up?" I asked as I approached.

"Oh, I suppose," he said. "Trying to sort out the necessary cargo from the unnecessary."

Another grad came past with another load of books.

"You don't have the stomach to leave it all behind?" I asked.

"I can't play favorites," he said. "I brought them all here, why can't I bring them back?"

They say there's less space because of the new kids, but that's all nonsense. We don't put kids in the cargo hold."

"Well," I said, "clutter seems to multiply wherever us Westerners tend to settle."

"That's what the reds would say," he said, and then he was cut off by a coughing jag. He held out his hand and said, "I'm fine, I'm fine," between bursts. It subsided and he said, "I'll see you in a few years, I suppose. That is, unless we die in our sleep."

"The best way," I said.

He nodded, offered a polite, weak smile, and he disappeared inside his lecture hall.

Nearing the main compound, the surroundings turned industrial and monochrome. Most of the screens covering the windows were rolled up or blank, no longer projecting the calming images of green fields and rivers and lakes and flowers. Instead, I saw out past the high grounds and into the valleys, where the covered walkways serviced the remote ends of the central

installation. There, a few cars drove across the old roads that flanked the weed-covered fields, the grass ragged and yellow in the late season. The sun was out in full force, but the sky still had its reddish, rusty haze, thinned out by pockets of blue and green. The view was no longer bleak or vaguely apocalyptic. It was quiet and peaceful out there. There was no danger or malice. The outside world was barren, but it was safe.

"I need to check you off the list, prof. Are you ready to be checked off?"

I turned and saw the Captain, decked out in his full military uniform. His pants were pressed and creased, and his boots were freshly polished.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm set."

"You're in bay two," said the Captain. "It's down the corridor and--"

"Yeah, yeah, I know where it is," I said.

"This is a military affair now," said the Captain. "I expect some semblance of order."

"You'll get it," I said. "Who'll give you a rough time, huh? No one."

"I'm just doing my job," said the Captain.

"That doesn't give you an excuse to be an asshole. It's not like they nuked all your friends, did they?"

"Worse," said the Captain. "They stopped paying us. Have a good trip, professor."

He continued down the hall. I followed the signs to the dock. There, most of the staff were grouped outside their bays, all conversing in small circles. Some of the kids crowded around a black-and-tan dog, all calmly stroking its fur. The Soviets stood nearby, one of them turning every few seconds to eye the dog and the kids. One of their pilots emerged from the adjacent bay and issued a command in Russian. The men followed him into the dock that led out to their ship. The last in line went over to the kids.

"Time for go," said the Soviet in clipped English. "Say goodbye at Laika."

The kids gave the dog one last pet, and they returned to their parents in the lines outside the bays. The Soviet bent down and pulled a treat from his pocket. The dog took it from his hand and chomped it in a few bites. The Soviet whispered some Russian into the dog's ear, and he kissed it on its head. He had a tennis ball in the other hand. He hurled it down one of the long halls leading away from the hub, and the dog chased after it. The dog leapt over the threshold of a hatch, which then automatically closed and locked.

I got in line for bay two. I didn't see anyone I recognized, and as the line pushed forward one at a time, the guys ahead of me carried on at a low volume. One of them wore a blue flightsuit, the other a pair of khakis, a dress shirt, and a tie.

"Have you heard anything else?" the man in the tie asked.

"Nothing much," said the one in the flightsuit. "They said that no one showed up for work in the past few months, so they couldn't find anyone who'd want to keep the program going. Now that they're official, they stepped into the usual role of government and got down to business."

"Business?"

"They cut our funding."

"That's insane. What about the guys up on Meridien K?"

The guy in the flightsuit shrugged.

"They're on their own, I guess. The Initiative is dead. For now, at least, until we can convince the taxpayers that it's worth their money to bring them back. We'll keep the port on standby, in case they decide to check up. That is, once they realize we aren't returning their phone calls."

Two of the Soviets came out of their bay and went to the clipboard-toting man at the head of bay two.

"Excuse me, but, uh," said one of the Soviets, "we seem to be in a bit of a tight squeeze. Would you mind if one of ours flew with you?"

"Not at all," said the man at the front. "Plenty of room. Just step to the back of the line."

"Many thanks, comrade."

"Don't mention it."

The first Soviet returned inside his bay and pulled the shutter closed. The second entered the line behind me.

"Hello," he said to me.

"Hello," I said to him.

"My English... not great," he said haltingly.

"That's fine," I said. "Same with my Russian."

"What I want say is," he said, "is that though our nations bomb sometimes, I like Americans."

"We're not Americans anymore," I said. "We're 'Mainlanders,' apparently. Whatever *that* means."

"I understand," he said. "My country? Name change all the time. Still same people. You see."

I came to the head of the line. I gave my name, and the man checked it off. Past the bay threshold was a long downhill jaunt through a metal shell. The Soviet came behind, and the last man closed the gate and followed. At the end of the jetway, we climbed through a narrow cylinder into the ship, and once inside, I stood comfortably. I followed the line ahead, and we entered the rows of the main cabin.

"You mind I sit with you?" asked the Soviet.

"Not at all," I said.

We sat down and strapped in. The seats ran four per row, pairs of two-and-two separated by the aisle. Across from myself and the Soviet sat a five-year-old boy and his father. The boy had a death-grip on his armrests. His face was white. The father opened his window shade and looked outside.

"Don't worry," said the father. "You feel a little push, and then it's all over. In a little while, we all go to sleep."

"Where are we going?" asked the boy.

"We're going to where grandma and grandpa used to live," said the father.

"Don't worry," said the Soviet to the boy. "My first time, I was your age."

The crew ran the final check. A few clipped transmissions ran through the cabin speakers. Compressed air hissed at a low drone.

"No need for formalities," said the voice through the speakers. "Ignition."

The craft throbbed as it pushed off the ground. Before the force of gravity became too overpowering, I pulled open the window shade. I saw our position shift as we rose into the sky, and the red, rocky ground passed below us. We went higher, and the full compound came into view. The Soviet strained to lean forward and look out the window. He pointed down below, at a sign built on the rooftop of the hub. It read, in black block letters: "NEW MARS COLONY."

"New Mars Colony?" he asked. "What happened to Old one?"

# YEAR FORTY-EIGHT

## The Lecture Circuit

The principal's office was in the corner of the building. Inside, the two corner walls were tinted glass, reducing the afternoon sun to an amber, smoky light. The view looked out onto a stretch of grass and a long, curved sidewalk that serviced the front of the school. From the center of the main approach rose a metal pole, and atop that pole hung two flags from a rope, both caught in the sporadic breeze. The rope's counterweight banged against the metal during lulls in the wind, but inside the glass, no one could hear it.

"Thanks for coming," said the principal as he shook the older man's hand. "And I'm so sorry, but your name escapes me at present, Mr...?"

"Just call me Tom," said the older man. "Most people call me Tom, anyway. Easy to remember."

"Tom, then," said the principal. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

"Again, thanks for coming. I know you're a busy man."

"I'm not. But I try to do one of these things every year. You know what they say: if history repeats itself," said Tom, "so does idle time."

The principal sat down in his chair. The office was nice, but it wasn't fancy. The chair looked comfortable, but it wasn't big. The desk was large, but it didn't dominate the room. Tom sat down in his own chair, and a third man sat next to him.

"Well, first of all," said the principal, "happy Freedom Day."

"Likewise," said Tom.

"Charlie, here," said the principal, "says you're quite the interesting character."

"He did?" asked Tom.

"You're not?" asked Charlie.

"Well," said Tom, "I'm not sure about that."

"Oh, nonsense," said the principal. "You know what they say about people your age."

"What age is that?" asked Tom.

"What age are you?" asked Charlie.

"Let's see. What is it, 1854?" asked Tom.

"Yes."

"So I was twenty-six when the dates shifted. So about sixty-six now, I guess. If these were the old days and I didn't have my g-meds, I'd be close to dead."

Charlie and the principal exchanged a glance. The principal gave a quick laugh. Tom sat motionless in his chair. He blinked once.

"I'm sorry," said the principal.

"Oh, it's fine," said Tom. "It's nothing personal. I don't laugh much. Out loud, that is. Anyone who survived that long had to master a neutral expression and adopt a sort of gallows humor."

"So you were a survivor?" asked the principal, his words very quick once Tom ended, and in the moment that followed, he leaned back in his chair to compensate, adjusting and readjusting to erase all pretense of urgency, of seeming too interested.

"I was a little bit of everything, I suppose," said Tom. "I survived out in the wild and in the streets and cities. I ran with the rogues a while."

"Rogues?"

"Opposition Forces," said Tom. "And I did an OW tour with the reg Forces, back when they were called the Marines."

"Oh-double-you tour?"

"Old war," said Tom. "Sorry to pepper my sentences with all these acronyms and whatnot. Back then, we developed a sort of sideways method to refer to things, to slip it under the old man's radar."

The principal nodded vaguely.

"I think I know what you mean. Do you mind..." he began cryptically, "if I take some notes?"

He produced a pad of paper, and he held a pen hesitantly over the page.

"Not at all," said Tom.

"Do you mind if I record this?"

The principal produced a small recorder the size of a cigar. He set it upright on the desk.

"No, I don't," said Tom.

"Do you mind if he stays?" asked the principal.

"Do you mind?" asked Charlie.

"Oh, not at all," said Tom. "Charlie's my neighbor. He told you that much, yes?"

"He did," said the principal.

"He probably hears all sorts of weird things at night, anyway," said Tom.

"I don't," said Charlie.

"Good," said Tom.

"This is all..." began the principal, as his eyes searched the sparse surroundings of the room, either searching for a word or pretending to search, "academic," he said. "A proposal for a sort of history book I'm working on in my off-hours."

"What sort of book?"

"Interviews and the like," said the principal. "Trying to get away from all the rhetoric and the rote facts. Trying to take away some of the manufactured glory. Does that sound about right?"

"I don't know much about glory," said Tom. "I just try to remember what happened."

"But you remember *how* you felt?" asked the principal.

Tom nodded, and the whole time, he kept his eyes locked on the principal. The principal wasn't sure if it was a sort of intimidation tactic. It wasn't. It was just an old habit.

"I remember everything," said Tom. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," said the principal. He sort of blurted out the word without considering its intended effect. Tom just kept looking straight at him, and the principal started to backpedal, twirling his pen in the air in the moment before continuing to speak. Tom held up his palm to stop him. Tom forced a slight smile.

"It's all right," said Tom. "I know. You're young and eager, like how we all used to be."

"I am," said the principal, "but young these days isn't the same as young in yours. No offense, obviously."

"It takes a lot to offend me," said Tom.

"Youth these days tries to carry a certain responsibility that got lost somewhere along the way."

"I agree," said Tom. "How old are you, chief? Twenty-six? Twenty-seven?"

"Twenty-five," said the principal.

"When I was your age, the dates shifted. It wasn't quite over, but it was getting close."

"What were you doing?"

"Surviving," said Tom. "Wondering with the rest of the survivors that maybe we clawed our way out of the mess just to get taken down by the pandemic. We all thought it was nature's big Fuck You to humans. Or Americans, at least. Kicking us when we were down."

"I can't imagine what that was like," said the principal.

"You can't?" asked Tom.

The principal put his pen to his lips and shook his head.

"Not really," he said.

"So many people say that they could," said Tom. "They say, 'Yeah, oh man, it must've been so *terrible* and *horrible*,' and, 'I can imagine how *scared* you were.' They just have a hazy image of what it must've been like. They entertain the thought for a few seconds or a few minutes and think they have the whole thing conceptualized. But until you wake up every morning dreading however miles you had to walk, or how long you had to wait in the shadows for some menacing thing to pass, you don't really get it. You had to live it, every moment for a few years. So yeah, it pisses me off when some runts say that they could've fought it in half the time it took us."

"So was it...?" the principal asked, trailing off, waiting for the gaps to be filled.

"Terrible? Horrible?" Tom shook his head. "Not really. Sometimes, yeah. But other times, I sort of liked it. I mean, who wouldn't? You get to do whatever you want. For misanthropes like me, I felt that a lot of people deserved it."

"You *liked* it?" asked the principal.

"I'm not supposed to?"

The principal shrugged and made a few scratches on his paper. Charlie kept his gaze half on the window, half on the dim corners of the room.

"Not all us old men look back on it and average out the experience to a negative," said Tom.

"If you don't mind, could I pose a few direct questions?" asked the principal, his eyes down on his paper the whole time.

"Sure," said Tom. "I've got some time."

"What was it like when it started?"

"How do you mean?" asked Tom.

"When it started? What was the mood? How did people react?"

"That depends when you peg the start date."

"When do you peg it?"

"I don't know," said Tom. "I was fifteen, sixteen at the time. I was thinking about getting a driver's license and getting laid. Next thing I knew, I was pulled out of school and taught how to use a gun. I didn't care much for the politics. All that squabbling. I know that, when the dust settled, they said it started when the President was capped."

"That wasn't it?"

"Call that the tipping point," said Tom. "All wars have to trace back to *something*, right? God forbid we actually delve into the national psyche and figure that shit out."

The principal winced slightly at the mention of "god," and again at "shit."

Tom continued: "Yeah, they never caught who shot the President. They said it was some sniper, but all the tinfoil hats think otherwise. Some inside job, maybe. So we all just dismissed it and said it was some crazy person. But hey, maybe they were the most rational person of all. Yeah, the President was popular. The economy was good. We weren't fighting any crappy wars. But what about all the rest? All that undercurrent that had been building up, as we sat around in all our fat prosperity and denied the fact that we were still a developing nation, that our first civil war was only a century and a half behind us? That if we weren't racist, we were sexist, and if we weren't sexist, we were racist, or xenophobic? That we were all hopped up on some brain-chemistry meds because our Western-materialist ways made us miserable? Yeah, the President got shot, and everyone who was pissed off or frustrated said it was time to switch it around. So we had our fun. We had our decade where we tried to live off some theoretical ideas while still being realistic enough to know how to field-strip a rifle and how to survive in the woods. That is, a lot of rogues joined the mil proper to get trained, then they jumped ship and used the Forces' tactics against them."

"And that's how you won," said principal. "The so-called 'rogues' won."

"Nobody won," said Tom. "No one ever wins these sort of things. Both sides just give up and mash back together. The war ended how it started. It started because we were sick of our routines, and it ended because we wanted our routines again. We wanted to wake up every morning, put on some coffee, and read some bullshit in the newspaper without worrying about the pH level of our tap water or about resealing our windows for the next bioattack. But a few things got changed. We rebuilt the country for the better. It only took most of the population getting killed for it to happen."

The whole while Tom talked, his eyes were sharp, and he kept them aimed right at the principal. His words were quick and concise, and he didn't linger on any particular phrase, nor did he glance around the room in search of some idea he couldn't quite articulate. When he talked with his hands, his gestures were definite and crisp. He didn't suffer any vagueness, and he didn't seem as old as he claimed. But in that last moment, his eyes broke contact and lost focus, and he let them wander aside, looking out toward the stretch of grass outside.

"Well," said Tom, "we're all here now, right?"

He offered a smile and he stood. The principal rose from his chair.

"So are we ready for this talk?" said Tom. "Freedom Day and whatnot."

"Yes," said the principal. "We have a full lineup today, so you only need to say a few words. Minus the cursing, of course."

"Well," said Tom. "I suppose I could--"

"Excellent," said the principal. "Right this way."

"I'll see you later tonight, right, Tom? Barbecue at my house?" asked Charlie.

"Yeah. We'll see," said Tom.

The principal led the way out of the office and down the quiet, spacious halls.

"You know," said Tom. "Back in my day, around the age of fifteen, schools started looking like prisons. But this?" he said, looking around at the surroundings. "This is nice. Open halls and skylights. Bright colors. No cops patrolling the halls with walkie talkies."

"Walkie talkies?"

"Two-way radios. Old tech."

"We keep a low profile here," said the principal. "Less technology means less distraction."

"Back to basics, hey?" asked Tom.

"Something to that extent. It was in the national mandate for education reform. It's been in there since post-war."

Tom shook his head.

"I took a break from reading mandates once the conflict ended."

"I don't blame you," said the principal.

"So this is some elite school, I hear? Just built?" asked Tom. "The smartest in the tri-county area or something?"

"We do have a rigorous screening program," said the principal, "but nothing that fragments our studentry into definite tracks. They're all sharp, and they get sharper each year. I'm sure they'll have some excellent questions for you."

"I hope I can answer them," said Tom.

They left the hall and entered one of the main hubs. The open space gave access to all the classrooms, none of which had doors. From his vantage, Tom saw young teachers pacing in front of blackboards, addressing hidden students, drawing words and diagrams with sticks of chalk held in dusty hands.

The principal led Tom into the nearest classroom. Tom paused at the threshold. Two-dozen eyes all turned and stared. The students were assembled in the middle of the room. They sat on individual squares of carpet. Some of them clutched juiceboxes and stuffed bears. Macaroni pictures and scribble-drawings hung on the walls.

Tom laughed.

"Fuck it," he said.

# EPILOGUE

## Old War

The forest ran for many miles across a vast stretch of land. It had its definite boundaries; it had no margins. The trees didn't thin out and give way to the plains. They simply ended at a dense wall, the same as how the green canopy overhead nearly blocked out the full glow of the sun. But some light slipped through the cracks, letting the earthen floor breathe and grow.

Behind the wall, a man ran toward the forest. He ran at a ragged pace, as fast as he could go, and from inside the wall, he could barely be seen. Even from a near distance, he couldn't be heard. The inner woods had its own life and sounds, and it tended to itself. Small birds darted between high branches. Unseen critters scavenged the underbrush. Rogue deer bounded along their invisible trails. Once they sensed the man incoming, they all ran away from him.

The man crashed through the wall and staggered forward. His mass and momentum carried him through the weeds and the low trees, snapping and snagging branches that cracked from his force, gradually slowing him as his feet brought him into the relative shadow of the woods.

He wore a green camouflage suit, bulky and cumbersome, and he clawed forward with hands covered by thick gloves taped to his sleeves. Over his head he wore a pale-green hood and a gasmask. On his feet were beige combat boots, dirtied and blackened, his pant legs draped over their top and sealed with more tape. He wheezed through his mask. He coughed and choked. He fell to the ground. His quick, shallow breath became slow and heavy. He rolled onto his back. He stared up at the tall trees and saw the slivers of a dim, vacant sun, far away in the hidden sky.

When he regained his senses, he saw nothing. It was black all around. Crickets droned in the moonless night. An owl gave a sharp cry, and the man propped himself up on his elbows. He pushed against the ground until his back met a tree trunk. He calmed his breath and let his hands hang at his side. His head drooped. The owl gave another call. The man went stiff. He looked out at the darkness surrounding, but he saw nothing.

At length, the black turned a deep blue, and once the sun cast long, definite shadows, the man struggled to his feet. He gave one look over his shoulder, to the north. He saw the green wall, past which were the indefinite plains, flat and shadeless and hostile. He turned south and began to walk. All urgency was gone, and he walked one step at a time, his concentration focused only on forward movement on an even bearing. He kept his eyes down on the dirt ground, and he deviated only to avoid collision with the bases of trees and clumps of overgrown underbrush. Each step brought him farther from the northern border, and each step brought the passage of time. The more steps he took, the more the sun shifted in the sky, and the more the woods claimed him.

Sometime past midday, the man stopped. It was an uncertain movement: not a crisp end, but a step aborted mid-stride. His foot made contact with the ground, and he froze. He looked out ahead, and he saw a shape that did not conform to the random unity of the trees and the green. Sitting on the ground, slumped against a tree, was another man. His chin was tucked into his chest. One of his arms was neatly contained in his lap, and the other was splayed at his side. He wore a long-sleeved grey shirt and dark green pants. Next to the man was a long, shallow hole dug into the earth, bordered by a mound of old dirt.

The man in the green camouflage suit approached. Each step was hesitant, and he planted each boot on the ground and maintained solid footing before he took another step forward. At length he reached the other man. Only at his nearness could he discern further details: the dirty, unkempt hair of the other man; his pale skin, nearly white, and his blue lips; the crusted, blackened blood; the limpness of his neck but the rigidity of the rest of his body; the revolver just beyond the man's grasp, and the five dull-brass casings of discarded, unspent bullets scattered at his side.

And then, movement to the east. The man in the camouflage suit, looming over the dead man, turned and looked. Again he saw the green and the dark brown, broken by the presence of

another color. He saw a reddish-brown shape, locked in position once spotted. A long tail rose above its head, held stiff in mid-air. Its dark eyes and pink nose looked at the man in the green camouflage suit and the dark lenses of his hood. The man moved his hand for the dead man's gun, and the dog turned and disappeared into the woods.

The man peeled the tape off his sleeves. He pulled off his gloves. His skin was pale, stretched thin over his hands, but his flesh did not wither when exposed to the air. He took off the tape on his boots. He untucked the inner flap of his hood and felt the wind on his neck. He took off his gasmask, and his hood, and the outer layer of his suit. Underneath he wore a brown uniform, devoid of all insignia, filthy and wrinkled. Dried, brown blood coated his right sleeve, and it left a long trail down his side.

He ran his white, trembling hands over his bald head and smooth jaw. He rubbed the cracked skin on his hairless knuckles. He closed his eyes and tipped his head toward the sky. The insides of his eyelids turned bright pink as he felt the heat of the dim, vacant sun. He took a deep breath.

He rummaged through the dead man's pack. Inside were rations in brown pouches, a box of matches, a rusty hatchet, plastic vials of pills, a dog collar, two canteens, and a milk jug filled with clear liquid. He took the dead man's gun and opened the revolving chamber. He ejected a single spent casing and loaded the five leftover bullets.

He took the gun and pack and jogged away on a southern bearing, leaving behind the shell of his green suit. Once there was a considerable distance between the two, and once the woods reverted to their unbroken shape and color in all directions, the man slowed to a walk. He still kept his feet close together, his eyes on the ground, his arms limp and loose at his side. From the pack, he took one of the canteens, and he drank a mouthful of warm water.

The man walked, and he drank, and he ate, and he slept at night. During sunlight hours, he hiked. His hands stopped shaking. Sometimes he momentarily took his eyes off the ground and looked up at the sky through the trees. But he simply moved through the woods on a straight bearing, crossing as many miles as he could before darkness came. Once the light faded, he stopped and sat to catch his breath. Once he was calm, he went to sleep, and the next day, he repeated the routine.

Hair grew on his head. A beard formed on his jaw. Summer became late summer, and the hot, humid days became merely warm. It never rained, and there were no clouds.

But the man began to act strange. He changed his bearing from south to east, then back to south, then west. For a stretch of days, he returned north, and then he retraced his exact steps back to his southernmost point. He stopped eating for days at a time, until he awakened some mornings and could not summon the strength to rise. At night, he built great big fires and fed them all the dead trees around. He circled the flames and drank the clear liquid from the plastic jug until he could barely stand, and then he would double over and vomit a brown, runny mess until his stomach emptied. When his hands shook, he took pills by the fistful, and he wandered the woods in a daze, his eyes turned to glass, his arms held out in front of him as though clearing a path through invisible spiderwebs. He mumbled to himself, stringing together sounds that had meaning to none but himself.

And when he awakened in the mornings, he sat upright and sulked back to his supplies, eating his rations in the shadows of trees, his eyes rising no higher than the ground, as though shouldering some shame or guilt. There was no one to watch him; even the birds and the deer fled at the sound of his approach.

But he saw the dog. He saw its reddish-brown form at the edge of his vision, half-hidden in the growth or behind the trees. When he stood still, the dog stood still. When he moved toward it, it backed away. The man ran for the dog, and the dog turned and fled. He chased it through the woods. He stumbled over fallen branches, tearing through the brush. The dog weaved through the trees, swift and near-silent, as the man charged forward with no concern for the great sound of his heavy footsteps, his hard breath, and the wake of his destruction.

He fired a shot and the dog kept running. He fired a second, and a third, and the dog retained its speed. The man fired a fourth and missed. He dropped to a knee and aimed the gun. The dog stopped and looked back at the man. The man's hands shook, and his last bullet went off its mark, fired off into the endless expanse of trees. The dog disappeared into the woods, and the man did not pursue.

The man returned to his gear. He spat on the ground. He sifted through the empty ration wrappers in his pack. He weighed the near-empty canteens in his hand. A few matches were left in his matchbox.

He held his breath for a moment and listened. He heard the wind in the trees, and the stray calls of distant birds, and the dry leaves blowing across the dirt ground. He looked up at the canopy and saw red and yellow and orange. The air was no longer warm but cool. The sun, hidden far above, was not yellow but silver.

The man emptied the spent bullets on the ground. The revolver still in hand, he turned north and started walking.

Most of the leaves were gone from the trees when he returned to the dead man. The branches were bare and sharp and crooked. The cold ground was stiff and hard underfoot. Each breath made its own visible cloud that lingered in the air for a moment, and then it vanished.

The dead man was in the same posture as summer. His flesh was no whiter than when he was first seen. His blood was still black. His hair was undisturbed by the wind. The shallow pit at his side was no deeper than before.

The uniformed man bent down next to the dead man. He put the barrel of the revolver underneath the dead man's chin, and he raised the dead man's head until he could see the dead man's eyes. His eyes were open, dim and vacant, fixed on a point none could see.

The uniformed man stood upright. He pointed the gun at the dead man's head. He pulled back the hammer with his thumb. He pulled the trigger and mimed the recoil of the shot. The chamber revolved, and the dry fire gave only a small sound, the tiny click of the parts moving into the next position, aligning another empty slot. The dead man did not move. The uniformed man put his boot on the dead man's shoulder. He pushed. The dead man crumpled forward. He rolled into the pit.

A few fat snowflakes drifted down from the sky. The uniformed man saw a reddish-brown form at the edge of his sight. It was the dog. But the dog was not hidden in the brush or behind a tree. It stood in plain sight. Its reddish-brown color was the same as the dead brown leaves that covered most of the dirt ground.

They both stood there in the woods. The snow fell down and settled on the dog's reddish-brown fur and on the man's brown hair. They both stood very still, waiting for the other to move.

(The end.)