

# Subliminal

# Subliminal

By: Tyler G Williams

*Tyler Williams*

To my good friend: Micah

A special thanks to my teachers and friends

*Tyler Williams*

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## WARNING

The following story depicts themes of violence, grief, war, and some harsh language.

Subliminal is **purely fictitious** and written completely for entertainment.

Most characters in this story are fictitious, but **some** places in Subliminal **are** completely real and **are** used as the backbone for specific settings.

Lastly,

Some tactics and framing of events are **not** entirely accurate but are meant to **represent** military strategy.

**Edition 3**

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## Prologue

My Name is Jacup Winston, or Jacob. I haven't done much before the Marines, but now, I might just be the greatest man to live.

It all started in February of 2014. I was 6, around the age I moved to the US, when Russia annexed Crimea. I don't remember too much then, but I knew that Ukraine wouldn't let that slide and start a "Revolution of Dignity", igniting the Donbas War, or the Russo-Ukrainian War. Years passed, and the storm brewed, and in 2022, Russia launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. At fourteen, I knew right then and there that Russia wasn't going to drop it, but all that continued was an endless stalemate. The war dragged on for 3 years until Russia came up with something, a counter-attack, that would bring all of Europe to its knees. It should've been obvious. After a long preparation period, with North Korea and China

at its side, Russia gathered troops behind the stalemate and launched another invasion, this time, of Poland.

World War 3 is now in session.

With Korea's recent expansion of docks and ports for naval support and China's advanced missile-based weaponry, Russia was set up for this assault.

Months later, Russia and its partners had conquered all of the West, struggling with Africa.

Then, 2 years later, a surprise attack was initiated, poking the hornet's nest, that is, America.

At 19 years old, I was drinking coffee at Dutch Bros when I pulled out the news on my phone and read the headline. Something changed me that day; I couldn't even taste the next sip.

A nuclear ICBM had been sent to New York, New York.

9 million people vanished from the face of the earth in the blink of an eye.

18:42

December 25, 2030

Mount Narodnaya

---

I stepped up to the last doorway of the bunker that barely exposed itself to the outside. Lifting my rifle through the doorway, I saw no one; it was empty. The 'bunker' was built like a fortress, with walls that covered where Tanks and Humvees would sit. It was empty now, but this bunker acted like a garage, with the ground vehicle exit/entrance to the left of the doorway and a helipad to the right.

I stepped through the doorway, and something caught the corner of my eye. My rifle stock

slammed against my skull. Everything spun for a brief moment, and when everything focused, a general charged me with a knife in his hand. I got up to retaliate, but we both scrambled to the floor. The general rolled us over, and he used the leverage of gravity to push the knife towards me. I quickly raised my arms to protect myself, but desperation gripped me. I found myself quickly losing this fight, and in my last hope of not dying, I swung a right hook, using my left arm to grab the general and connect the hook, causing him to reel and drop the knife less than an inch from my head. I grabbed the knife and threw it as quickly as possible at the general, poorly. The handle struck his rib, buying me enough time to scramble for my rifle.

**BANG**

**BANG**

The general had ripped his revolver from his holster and fired toward me.

I grabbed my rifle and swung it around to the general. Squeezing the trigger, a distinct sound rang.

Click...

The general grinned and aimed his revolver again, training his sight. I planted my boot

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against the ground and darted for the wall that protruded from the exterior. I braced myself for the molten pieces of lead to hit me, but all that came was the slam of the hammer hitting an empty cylinder.

I took the moment to rush him, tackling him to the ground. Right hook after left and I felt the general's boot on my chest, throwing me forward. The general hastily scrambled for his knife. My head still spun as I saw his silhouette march toward me. I spun around to stand, but he grabbed me and rammed the knife into my thigh. I yelped in pain; my spine sent jolts of pain through my whole body.

I leaned forward and kicked him, causing him to reel and drop the knife.

I grabbed the knife and hurled it toward him.

This time, it connected perfectly with the center of his torso. He gasped and hovered his hands around the knife before ripping it out. He pulled his revolver from his holster, shaking, mumbling in Russian.

“Vy, proklyatyye svini!... Vy vmeshivayetes' vo vse dela...” He reloaded his revolver, trying to steady his breathing. “Kak budto vam bol'she delat' nechego!...”

I finally looked back up and noticed his face growing unusually pale.

He lifted his revolver and aimed it at me, staggering. I knew this was the end, and I could

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feel my head growing lighter and lighter. A very brief moment passed as I stared at the general; I don't think he was all there.

His stance was uneven, and his breathing rasped. I finally heard the hammer pull back and the bang of his revolver reverberate through the mountains.

*Tyler Williams*

*June 1st, 2030*

## Chapter 1:

### The Second Liberation of Paris

---

Planes and helicopters roared, some bursting into flames and crashing into the ground.

We were all huddled behind a partially broken building like schoolboys making a shady trade. Only ten of us out of the initial 50 are left. 15 died in the crash on the way here, and the other 25 died getting to the French ambassador,

Louis Demont, who we were supposed to extract.

Since the Spetsnaz set up SAMs, they have been shooting down every aircraft.

When we got to the building to extract Demont, the Spetsnaz set explosives on the main columns supporting the building, causing it to collapse as we were just getting out of the building. We were meant to be picked up via Chinook but SAMs shot it down on the way here.

We were radioed a new idea: There were four main turrets set up in an obvious way to lock down Paris and keep air traffic at zero. (North, East, South, and West)

We split our groups into five, two in each group. Eight of us will set explosives, and two of us will watch Demont.

I got paired with my buddy, Lucas Smith, of course.

Lucas was a bit shorter than me (no more than an inch). He had thin, rugged, black hair and hazel eyes, though you could barely tell these things through his facial camo (A few black streaks with green and brown splotches).

We met in elementary school and have been friends since. We've always kept our eyes on joining the Marines together.

Lucas and I rounded the back of our building retreat and headed about a mile north (The direction we were sent for the first SAM).

As we cautiously ventured through the city, it looked hazy of orange and yellow, but a thick shadow of smoky overcast.

Tanks swarmed with Spetsnaz rolling through the streets.

We found a building with a massive turret holding dozens of rockets on the top of it. The dilapidated, 8-story building loomed overhead. A charred sign named it, "*Hopital Universitaire La Pitie Salpetriere*". Tanks rumbled on an offensive patrol.

We both sat behind a mutilated wall a few hundred feet from the entrance for a long moment before Lucas broke the silence, "I've got an idea on how to get in," he proposed, "We could find some 'forms that aren't in use and sneak in?" I thought for a moment that it would more than likely be the safest, but it could also be the dumbest and very awkward to do. I decided to ask how we'd get the uniforms before agreeing on the idea.

We left the hideout and searched for any dead bodies to get a uniform, but the very few we found were riddled with bullet holes or

burned past the point of disguise. We kept searching and eventually found a few guards posted about 20 meters from our lookout wall. An idea we both got was to take the guards out silently and mouth the timing, "Take 'em out, he says," I said to Lucas, "Out to dinner." He replied with a grin.

They were set up down an alley, watching the entrance from another angle.

"3...2...1..." Lucas counted down with his fingers across the alley. We struck when he clenched his fist. My Spetsnaz thrashed before a loud snap cut him off. Lucas had just finished with his, too. We dragged them to a nearby, now unnamed, restaurant down the street. It looked like it'd be a diner, with warmers on the counter and sneeze guards protecting the counter in front of a kitchen, possibly a bakery. We swapped in our respective stalls in the bathroom.

I had just gotten the pants on before I heard a scream high enough to break glass. I quickly got out of my stall to hear Lucas, and another, grunting, "Lucas-" I was cut off by the stall door kicking me into the sink, by Lucas getting kicked through the stall, by his Spetz kicking him.

My side throbbed with pain from the sink as Lucas reeled to the left from the kick, his breath knocked out. "How is your Spetz still alive?!" I asked him, though it was rhetorical because of obvious reasons.

I reached for my M18 in my side holster but was met with 4 knuckles and a thumb to the side of my face.

The shirtless spetz was about 6 feet tall and looked like he'd been benching tanks since he could walk. With the ultimate knuckle sandwich I was met with, I was sent into the wall behind me and quickly turned over to get hooked left and right. My vision started to blur.

After a couple of punches, I had enough and ducked on his right hook, letting him punch the wall. I was still dizzy, but I managed to throw a fist square in his chest, causing him to reel back into Lucas. As the Spetz stumbled backward, Lucas fired a few rounds from his M18 into the Spetsnaz's back. I ducked as his rounds went through and slammed into the wall behind me.

The spetz quickly became coated in crimson red and fell back into the stall from whence he came, sitting on the toilet, staring at me as his head limped. I shook off the huge headache

that had brewed. "Cutting it a bit close," I remarked.

Lucas and I looked at each other for a brief moment and continued to change.

When we both finished changing we checked each other out to confirm we looked legit, and the differences were barely noticeable.

Afterward, we hid and waited for a patrol to roll by.

When one finally passed, we snuck into it, making sure we ended up in the back. Now, all that was left was to plant the C4 on that SAM. The patrol was rather large, consisting of about twenty or so Spetz lined behind a T-90.

We went unnoticed all the way and safely made it to the hospital housing the SAM.

When we got inside, it looked exactly like I thought it would: main lobby, then elevators just off to the left of the lobby. Lucas, two other guards, and I got into the same elevator.

Lucas was lined directly in front of the buttons and paused for a second, confused, eventually pressing the topmost button. "Itak, chto vy dvoye delayete na verkhnem etazhe?" The Spetz closest to me asks, "Just maintenance." I replied in Russian.

"Hmm..." the second Spetz replied.

*Молокаи* on his left pec translates to Molokai.

The elevator doors opened to the top floor, but we had to climb stairs to get to the roof. We climbed the stairs to the middle of the H of the building. Weirdly, the Spetsnaz followed upstairs with us. When we opened the roof access door, the SAM was right there on the edge of the building. Lucas and I walked up to it, but with him having the C4, he would be the one to place it. I would have to be the one to make it look like he was doing something. As we were walking up to it, the quiet Spetz named *Давуд*, Davud, stopped us, pulling his AR out and asking with no accent, "Who are you?! Are you Makeral's?". I froze. "You aren't Russians?" I asked. David lowered his rifle and exhaled sharply. "We- that was OUR mission; we were supposed to blow that SAM!" Davud explained. In France, other forces such as the French and English Armies were here, there were only about 1 or 2 platoons here that knew of Makeral's objective and our crash. The SAM turned opposite of us to an American jet that purposely flew into the radar. The F-22 fired missiles just before the SAM shot it down. I was afraid we had done our part and we would become one of those noble sacrifices with a huge memorial and a purple heart, but

the jet fired missiles at the bottom of the building, causing it to collapse.

Davud and Molokai went missing, but Lucas and I succumbed to the forces of gravity and started sliding down the, now-inclining, roof. Lucas landed on and fell through each floor but was thrown out of the building on his way to the first floor. I, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. As I kept sliding, a gap in the roof opened and allowed me to slip right through, landing me in between the 3rd or 4th floor.

I was trapped underneath a pile of rubble. It was too tight to take good breaths. I was trapped in a small pocket around the rubble, but my left side wasn't; my arm was throbbing under the concrete. I tried to lift the rubble but only lifted it an inch or two before setting it back down. When my eyes adjusted, I grabbed a piece of rebar to my right and started clanging it, each swing weaker than the last. It was too cramped. I couldn't move enough to make any loud sound. "Jacob!" I heard a familiar call distantly, "Keep making that sound, I'll find you!". "Lucas!" I screamed, my voice cracked. My throat was raw and burning, but I did exactly what he said and clanged the rebar a few more times, only to stop because my shoulder and arm were

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getting sore. I started to feel light-headed. Some dust fell from a few feet above me. I covered my eyes as a bright light beamed from above. A blurry silhouette stood overhead and peeled away more rubble before I passed out.

Four days later...

*June 5th, 2030*

I woke up in a hospital in Tulsa, Oklahoma. I've been here before for a training exercise. Military bases litter Oklahoma, so it's more than likely *not* a coincidence. My vision was still blurred, like a camera out of focus. My left arm also stopped hurting, and it was kind of concerning at the time until I felt an itch. I moved my arm closer to scratch it, but my right arm passed straight through the itchy spot. I stared at my (missing) arm for a good moment until I finally processed it. My breath quickened

as I tried to flex my arm. I felt the muscles move, but nothing was there. Where did my arm go? I felt if I kept trying to move it, it would maybe... Reappear. I must have screamed because doctors rushed in moments later to check on me, rudimentarily asking, "Do you have a headache?", "Do you feel like you have a fever?", "Are you feeling light-headed?", "Does your arm hurt?", "Does it hurt when I shine this bright-ass light in your eye?!".

That last one didn't happen.

When the doctors stopped asking me questions, I got to ask some of my own.

"What happened? My arm- Wh- where's my arm!?" I asked.

"What happened?" A doctor jotting on a clipboard repeated, "That assignment was a success. If it weren't for a..." the doctor trailed flipping through papers, "Ah! Sergeant Smith. If it weren't for him, you probably wouldn't be here. At least, not in *this* room.", " And my arm?" I asked impatiently. He flipped through the clipboard. "We believe it was a rebar that impaled your elbow. Don't worry, we were afraid

you might've gotten tetanus, so you've been vaccinated. Let us know if you start getting muscle spasms or if your jaw or neck is stiff and or sore." He spoke like he read off of a script, "After the rubble had been cleared, you were medevaced, very carefully of course. You were quickly treated in a liberated, French hospital, and then flown over here for recovery." He finished, squeezing something into my IV bottle, which was connected to my right hand. "What about Demonte, Louis Demonte? Is he okay?" I asked. "Oh, the Ambassador?" He confirmed, "He's completely fine; Minor injuries, he'll be okay." he left the room. The room quickly fell silent. After a minute or two of looking around the room, I recognized Lieutenant Finn Makeral and Lucas across from me, asleep. Lucas was to the right of Mak and Mak was directly across from my bed. I was placed on the left side of the entrance door in the middle of the room. I felt a wave of relief and drowsiness...

3:54...

I checked the time, noticing someone looming over me with their finger over their mouth as if to shush me.

I sat up, startled, but he whispered to follow him, "I'm glad you're awake," he whispered, "We've got something for you."

I followed him out of the room and was blinded by the fluorescent lights. "How long were you there?" I asked, "At your bed, I assume you're asking?" He replied with a question, and I nodded. "About 10 minutes." He replied after a long moment. After another moment of walking down the hall, my left arm started hurting like I'd flexed it for too long; it felt hyperflexed. "My arm's amputated, right?" I asked. He nodded. "Then why does it still hurt?", "It's what we call 'Phantom Limb,'" The doctor replied. "Your brain is missing the signals from that arm, so it simply makes them up with the most logical signal possible.", "Here we are," he said, raising his arm toward the direction of an open door.

Inside the door was a black room sealed by sterilized glass. In the room set an uncomfortable-looking medical bed with a huge array of needles poised over it. "No Way, Phil the Psychopath!" I exclaimed, "I'm not sitting under that!", "Well, you won't be sitting."

He corrected, "And good guess," he smirked, "My name is *actually* Phil, Phil Browne. Now go inside there, lay your head face down, and relax. Trust me." He said, walking over to a console behind the glass. Dr. Browne, as he says, has messy, light brown hair and bright blue, almost silver, eyes.

The dark room made it very easy to get lost in there if there wasn't any light.

I made my way to the bed and lay face down. "Now, just relax. This procedure is only for the Durny, as we call it. It stands for Direct Internal Neural Recognition Implant." Dr. Browne informed, "No need to worry, though, you'll be asleep throughout the process, and when you wake up, you'll have a brand new arm." He said, as a needle stuck into the back of my neck, "Just count to one hundred, Sergeant!" he announced, "Can I call you Sergeant?" He asked.

I immediately started feeling drowsy, and I noticed a Dubble Bubble wrapper on the floor with a piece of paper reading, "*Focus on me!*". I vaguely remember Dubble Bubble, but I'm surprised they're still around. "Why does it have so many B's?" I asked out loud on accident. "Excuse me?" A familiar voice asked as I quickly drifted into sleep.

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His words rang and replayed in my head.

## Two years earlier...

January 29, 2028

9:38

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It was rainy and cold, and Lucas and I had made it to the recruitment office after hearing the New York Attack. My drenched jacket saved my skin-tight T-shirt. I made it inside, and our shelter now relied on the recruitment office for the Marines.

Lucas sat to my right. On the wall to my left, A poster of a man in a blue dress staring at me read, "Marines: The Few. The Proud,".

Soft elevator music played as I sat down after taking my ASVAB test, waiting patiently for the result.

My damp jeans clung to my legs. The officer came out from behind a door, "Winston." He offered me into his office.

I wiped my palms on my jeans.

The office was small, to the point. The recruiter was black, and a hair taller than me. Plaques on the wall solidified his presence.

He didn't bother with small talk.

"So, you want to join the Marines, son?" he asked firmly, sitting down at his desk. "Of course-" I corrected myself, "Yes, sir," I sat straighter.

"Luckily, you've taken the ASVAB before," He said, opening a manila folder. His eyes were sharp, scanning my file. "I see you have a clean record – No criminal record, no jail time. That's good. You played football. Linebacker." he raised his eyebrows, looking up, "Yes, sir. I replied. He nodded. "That's good." A faint smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "It's usually you football boys that end up here." He remarked, looking back at the folder. He narrowed his eyes, "You're Russian?". I froze for a moment, "Uh- Yes. Sir."

He looked over the folder, nodded slightly, then sighed.

"Well, you're aware of our situation, I assume." He gestured for me to reply. "Yes, sir.

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The New York Attack.” I replied. He nodded again, “We need soldiers, so I’m not going to be picky.”.

He sat back in his chair and spun back and forth lightly, fidgeting with a pen, “No injuries I should be worried about? Medical conditions?” he asked. I shook my head.

He nodded for the last time and stood up, holding out a hand, implying a handshake. I firmly returned. His grip was strong. “Then welcome to the Marines,” he said with a smile.

## Chapter 2: Awakening

---

“Wakey, Wakey...!” a faint and familiar voice called out, sing-songy, “Earth to Sergeant!” It echoed again. A bright light beamed left and right in my vision. “Sergeant!” Phil barked as I finally opened my eyes. I pulled myself up against the lulling gravity.

“Ah! There you are!” Phil exclaimed. He checked my pupils. “How are you?”

I didn't reply. “You've been asleep for a whole day, I figured the arm would've fatigued you but, wow!” he exclaimed, “Anyway,” Phil went on, “The Durny implant was successful, and I even had the time to drill the socket into your arm and connect the prosthetic forearm.”. I was still groggy from the anesthetic. “What?” My throat was dry. His voice tugged at a bit of annoyance in me. Did he know that? “The arm,” he said.

I looked down at the replacement. It wasn't a dream. I raised my left arm, and the prosthetic obeyed, my eyebrows raised, then furrowed. I hate it. Phil spoke quickly, “It's a Carbon Titanium, Carbotanium, skeleton with an extremely resistant Aluminum shell, coated in a tough silicone 'skin'. There's thicker silicone at the elbow and wrist for protection from elements and an easy texture against your real arm-” He paused, “Upper arm,” He corrected himself. I blinked quickly, processing the info dump. “It's heavy,” I replied, flexing the arm's metallic digits. It obeyed seamlessly. “Oh, here!” Phil jumped, pressing a button on the arm just below the wrist, “Tada!” he exclaimed. Two prongs stuck out from inside of the arm,

about an inch apart, beaming light towards itself to roughly describe a picture, "So?!" Phil demanded, "What do you think?!" He said excitedly. "Yeah," I replied, "Wh- What is this for?" , "Look, I do this..." he said, pulling out some type of device.

*CAN YOU READ ME*

Very rough words rolled across the hologram, "...And you see that!" Phil exclaimed, "This is the first hologram made WITHOUT mirrors, how are you not excited!?" Phil complained, "...What is this for?" I accidentally repeated. Phil's face fell flat. "Whatever," he walked out of the room. I sat in the silent room, objectiveless.

I scanned the room, then landed back on the arm. A weird pit feeling sat in my stomach. I stared for a while longer, running my hand across the 'skin' until I glanced to my left, finding a small, round table with a sheet of paper on it. Reaching for it, the paper read:

*The Advanced Soldier Program.*

An ad.

*Tyler Williams*

A 60s-throwback picture of a robot with a human head, standing on a hill with an older-style rifle slung on its shoulder. I narrowed my eyes at the print.

"...Fixing the wounded, to help the broken..." I rolled my eyes and sat the paper back down. Then, without another thought, I left to head back to my room. I assumed my clothes would be there. I counted the rooms aimlessly, drifting in thought.

*"Room 97... 98... 99..."*

April 1st, 2030

5:42

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“Three blips on the monitor,” Lucas said in a hushed tone. I shifted to my other knee, mud latched onto it. “How far?” I asked, squinting through the downpour. “40 meters, North-East-East.” He replied, “Think we got something?” I asked. “Let’s go check it out,” Lucas said, slowly sitting up in a crouched position.

We were lying down in a muddy ditch, holding our position since the rest of our platoon had been tagged. “Rain’s coming down hard. You sure it’s not fudging with the sensor?” I asked. “Nah, it’s right here,” Lucas replied, turning his flashlight on at the spot of the blips. The cone of light revealed 2 raccoons that quickly scurried off when they noticed they had been spotted. “Maybe the rain *is* messing with it.” Lucas said, hitting the side of the tablet, “I thought those don’t pick up animal heartbeats?” I asked. “They don’t,” He replied. The tablet is very experimental, but it picks up the faint frequencies that our hearts make

when they beat. They're easy to lose over distance, so the range of the sensor is about 90 meters; However, that is only when there's perfect weather and a flat surface, like on a football field.

"Nothin'," Lucas said disappointed, leaning back into our ditch. "Hey," I said, catching Lucas's attention, "Just a few more minutes and we're done.". We sat around patiently for a while, staying low and concealed until the game was over. I had 5 tags, and Lucas had 6. We wiped out Adrian's platoon, after our platoon was wiped out, of course.

*Thwip,*

"Ow," Lucas winced, turning to me. I noticed a white ball hitting the ground.

He cursed, "Wait." I was stopped by the same thing that stopped him. The fobs in our pockets vibrated. The game just finished.

"WHOOHOO!!!" A voice yelled from above us, "Ugh, it's Sergeant Bullcrap!" Lucas complained. "YEAH!" Billcap laughed.

"Ah, hell..." I groaned, sitting back into the mud.

"LOOK AT THAT!" Billcap mocked, "THE

ALMIGHTY LUCAS, FALLING TO HIS KNEES!"

Billcap exclaimed, "Oh, shut up, Billcap!" Lucas

barked, "Last time I checked, Lucas, dead people don't talk!" Billcap laughed. We headed back to base to wash up and prepare for the "death" punishment: Watching the victors get their spoils.

"Gather up!" Lieutenant Finn Makeral yelled, or Mak as we call him, "Everyone who survived, gather in front of me up here!" Mak was standing on a slightly raised platform overlooking about 50 other men who had "died". GySgt James Royce, MSG Sarah Lewis, and lastly, PFC James Billcap proudly walked up to the platform to receive whatever reward as seen fit.

"Royce," Mak called, walking behind him, "I'm not surprised. Good work. How many confirmed kills?" Mak asked. "Four kills, sir?" Royce replied. "48-hour dessert allowance for meals and a 4-day pass!" Mak shouted, "Sergeant Lewis." He called next, "Man..." I whispered to Lucas, "If we weren't talking, we wouldn't have gotten beat by a rookie.", "You make it sound like it's my fault." Lucas replied, "Dhunn's platoon, sir," Lewis said uneasily. "Then why is Billcap still here!?" Mak yelled. "He got away," she looked down, "sir!" she said quickly. "How. Many. *Confirmed*. Kills?" He emphasized. "11," She stuttered.

"72-hour dessert allowance," Mak said, turning, "But you let Billcap get away... 1-week pass." Mak announced reluctantly, "And..." Mak looked at Billcap with a raised eyebrow, "Private Billcap!" Mak shouted. Billcap giddily took a step forward, filled with pride, "You survived?" Mak asked skeptically, "Yes, sir!" Billcap replied, "Two kills!" Billcap said with a huge grin. He searched for, and found, Lucas and I, together, his grin stretched even further.

"Well then," Mak announced, "24-hour dessert allowance and a 2-day pass!". Everyone else headed back to their bunks with heavy heads.

21:00

"YooHoo!" Lucas called with a grin, leaning over his bunk into mine, "Looky here!" He said holding a *PLAYBOY* magazine, "Wow!" Lucas exclaimed, turning to the next page, "How'd you get your hands on that?!" I asked, "A little gift from outside the box." Lucas replied shadily, "You're gonna fall if you don't get back on your bunk." I said, "No I-" Lucas replied, falling, "Lieutenant's gonna kill you when he sees you with that." I warned, "Oh, whatever," Lucas replied, getting up and rubbing his head,

“He’d probably take it ‘cause he *wants* it!” Lucas laughed, jumping back onto his bunk.

“WHAT IN THE GOD FORBID WORLD IS THIS, SERGEANT?!” Mak shouted at Lucas, after searching the bunks, on the stand where Royce, Lewis, and Billcap received their rewards, “I SHOULD TEACH YOU A LESSON MYSELF!” He spat, “GET READY FOR THE SANDBAG TEST!”. Everyone that had heard the commotion gathered and “oohed” at the punishment.

*The Sandbag Test:*

- The Sandbag Test is an extreme physical endurance test as punishment. The punished must complete 100 push-ups with a sandbag on their back, if they refuse, they will succumb to whatever punishment is given to them.
- If they accept, they must answer questions during the push-ups, and if they fail to answer completely, they get another sandbag.
- If the participant buckles during the test, they will be given an agreed-upon punishment by his or her peers.
- If you manage to survive the Sandbag Test, you will be revoked of any punishment and get off scot-free.
- Lastly, the Sandbag Test is *NOT* forced; it is optional.

“89...90, SERGEANT!” Mak yelled, “Tell me,” Mak asked, in a mockingly pleasant tone, “Where’d you get the magazine from?” Mak asked with a grin, “Piss... Off...” Lucas strained. With 4 sandbags, he was sweating bullets. The sandbags were about 30 pounds each and a pain to lug around, “No shot he gets a hundred.” a soldier in front of me whispered to another. Judging by the one-arrowed insignia, the unfaithful soldier is a private. “That’s another sandbag then, Sergeant!” Mak said with a grin from ear to ear, placing the sandbag on Lucas’s way down. “94...95...96, Sergeant!” Mak reminded Lucas, Lucas noticeably moving faster, “97, Where... Is that... Magazine from?” Mak whispered in his ear, lying on his stomach, “From...” Lucas spat, “Your Mothers...”, “99...100!” Mak announced. Lucas dropped to the floor, “You just beat the record, son.” Mak said, standing up. The sandbags were slid off of Lucas’s trembling body. His breath was rapid and shaky. Getting a clear view of Mak, he has thick, blonde hair, with, almost-black, bottomless, brown eyes that could steal the truth about anything straight from your soul. Everyone applauded at his feat.

"100... 101." I said to myself.

As I predicted, my clothes were folded on my bed, and Mak and Lucas were gone. I figured I would do the same.

I took my clothes and changed in a nearby bathroom. Looking into the mirror I saw a few scrapes on my face. I have thick, black hair, and light-brown eyes.

After I changed, I headed back to room 101 and set my folded gown on my bed.

## Ospreys:

Pretty funky-looking birds, eh? Well, the *VTOL*, not the actual- whatever.

V-22 Ospreys were generalized into most branches after America was plunged into the deep, dark waters of the Third World War. With a cargo door turret mount and turret mounts behind the cockpit, it was ideal for troop transportation and assault. The only problem was the history of accidents by Ospreys. Sometimes, because of the rotors on the sides of the aircraft, it would easily flip over. They were decommissioned in the mid-2010s, but the malfunction was resolved around June of 2026.

The main problem was electronic and was caused by HCE (Hard Clutch Engagement) which caused it to focus power on one engine, causing the V22 to roll and either nosedive or explode. The V280 almost replaced the V22, until the root cause of the malfunction was found and resolved.

The V280 is still used, but it's more for specific uses similar to the Blackhawk.

24 occupants could be in the Osprey's cabin at once, 12 troops on each side.

Just over the horizon revealed Europe, more accurately Spain. With dozens of birds armed to the teeth, we would push the Spetsnaz back.

An alarm blared in the cockpit, "Lock-on," A pilot called, "Deploying flares," the co-pilot called back.

The flares were like fireworks, they were more felt than heard.

Explosions from outside rattled the fuselage from other unlucky Ospreys, "No hit!" The co-pilot sighed in relief.

"How long 'you think we got 'till Europe's our's again?" Yinstz asked me, leaning over, "I don't know, a few months at the most?" I muttered. Yinstz was the same age as me, he had blonde hair, and a stupidly wide sense of humor. We met in middle school, a few years after I met Lucas, and we quickly became friends. The alarm blared again, "Flares!" The pilot called, again the flares could be heard

throughout the cabin with explosions rattling the Osprey, “No-hit!” The co-pilot replied. “So,” Acki inquired, “If you die, do I get your smokin’-hot girlfriend?” He asked Royce, “Nah, if I die, you’re goin’ down with me,” Royce replied, bumping his shoulder with his fist. I don’t know Royce or Acki too well, but I do know they’ve been great friends for a long time. Royce is a solid soldier—One of the best, really—And I’ve never had a reason to dislike him. Acki is about the same; he can have his moments of stupid humor but when it comes down to it, he’s brilliant—A tech genius. The alarm blared again, “Flares!” The pilot called, “We’re out,” The co-pilot unbuckled and hastily climbed from the cockpit and into the cabin, “BRACE FOR IMPACT-”

September 1, 2030

---

Ever get that feeling you're falling, but then wake up?  
I woke up, but I was still falling. I was a few hundred meters in the air, along with everyone else in my troop. I watched the Osprey spin below me, crashing into the ground below. I quickly became aware of what was happening and instinctively pulled the cord at my waist that would open my parachute. The quick snag of the parachute knocked the breath out of me. The ground still quickly came up on me, which escalated into a blur of green.

I woke up in a tree. Well, I'm dangling- I'm hang- I'm- you know what? Whatever. My parachute was caught in the tree and now I'm suspended about 20 feet in the air.

The crash site was just in front of me. Bodies littered the ground, only a few of us had pulled our chutes.

My best guess would be that we were far south-west, near the coast of Spain. After surveying the Osprey, I noticed one of our guys who was sawed in half by a propeller from the Osprey.

A moment passed and I was about to unbuckle the chute when I heard shouting in the distance, foreign. Spetsnaz. I played dead.

They came by as a patrol, checking the crash site for possible survivors. 5 of us went missing, and one of us is confirmed dead.

Leaving 18 possible POWs. They came by and ignored me, possibly because I was a blood-dripping body hanging in a tree. They checked everyone they could, which was almost all of us. They found two guys, Royce and Acki, the only physically well and semi-conscious bodies.

They had pulled their chutes around the same time I did. A few other Spetz came by and dragged off Royce and Acki. While they were

leaving, they signaled each other in Russian and hand gestures too quickly for me to understand. I waited until I couldn't hear them anymore. I tried to unclip my harness to drop from the chute but it was stuck; it wouldn't budge. I took a moment to debate before coming up with the bright idea to *cut* the straps to my chute. I settled on it and awkwardly grabbed my knife. The first strap snapped easily but the centripetal force started a slight swing. The second strap finally gave, releasing me to the unforgiving forces of gravity.

I landed awkwardly and lay back in pain for a moment.

I felt my uniform getting damp and uncomfortably cold. I sat up and water followed me, splashing. I landed in a puddle mixed with mud and blood. My arm short-circuited and stopped responding to my commands. I opened the holographic thing and an error code rolled across.

*ERROR 3: MILD ELECTRONIC DAMAGE; WATER*

So it still worked, but need ventilation.

*VENTILATING*

*Tyler Williams*

Words rolled across as sounds could be heard inside the prosthetic, a loud pop followed by hissing came from a thin crack lining straight down the forearm. It clicked and popped open, hinging freely. I felt like *Buzz Lightyear*. You know, that one movie from, what, 30 years ago?

## Chapter 3: Apprehension

---

My name's James Royce. I grew up an athlete and always had a desire to be 'that guy'. Then, one injury shattered that, and I just became 'a guy'.

I became selfish, burned bridges, and forgot who I was.

I felt like my life was in 3rd person. What had happened to me completely changed me. Then it hit me, I needed a redo. So, with some help, I enlisted in the Marines. I figured I could also get college tuition. Then, when I joined, I got a whole new perspective on life.

But now, In my situation, I'm as good as dead. Looking back, it all hit the fan starting Easter Sunday, one of the last open training missions we had.

*Tyler Williams*

April 1st, 2030

## Easter Sunday

28°F, Relative humidity: 90%, medium rain and sleet

“Nothin’s on the sensor,” Soup said, “Rain’s blockin’ it.”. “Just wait,” I replied, “Lewis, you read?”.

“Yeah,” a clear reply came, “Thermals blocked, but I’ve got eyes. I’m still concealed.” Lewis informed.

“Good, keep watch.” I replied, “Switching pos,” I crawled through the grass and mud.

“I see you,” Lewis replied from afar.

We were in a thick forested area in Oklahoma. This area was abundant in flat terrain that split into these ‘cliffs’ if you will, that reached up to 15 feet tall. I was prone in a ghillie suit in the middle of a flat area surrounded by these ‘cliffs’,

“Careful, Lucas's platoon is there,” Lewis warned. Lewis was concealed under thick brush just off the edge of the cliff, her

overwatch allowed a full view of the valley and full concealment by keeping her barrel before the edge of the drop-off.

"Lucas's platoon?" I remarked, "I got this," I crawled into a depression in the ground, my ghillie suit blended with the grass.

I was everything and nothing.

"Maybe the rain *is* messing with it." Lucas said, hitting the side of the tablet. "I thought those things don't pick up animal heartbeats?" Jacup asked. I tried my best not to reel as one of them stepped on me.

"We've got a problem," a huffing Lewis called over the radio, "I made contact with Dhunn's Platoon. My position is compromised. Billcap is on the run, be advised. I'm relocating." She said in a hushed tone as she reconcealed her position, "I count 5 tangos. Two dead ahead, and three dispersed behind you." She said. I didn't reply.

I slowly moved behind Acki and tagged him, fist-bumping him on his way to the ground. I followed up with Marker, and shot Jameson. Then, as if I was never there, I returned to the ditch I was initially in, concealing myself.

"Nothin'" Lucas complained, disappointed.

"Careful, Billcap is on the hill directly in front of

you," Lewis said. A fob vibrated in my pocket.

The game's over.

"WHOOHOO!" Billcap cheered as Lucas and Jacup cursed.

"Oh, it's Captain Bullcrap!" Lucas complained.

"Sergeant Royce!" Mak called for me, I stepped forward and he lurked behind me, "I'm not surprised, good work. How many confirmed kills?" Mak asked, "Four kills, sir," I replied. Mak didn't hesitate, "48-hour dessert allowance for meals and a 4-day pass!" Mak shouted.

Our dessert allowances allow us extra dessert during our meals over the allotted time, unlike what other guys thought.

Day passes allow us to skip something like the grueling 20-mile runs.

The next day Lucas did the Sandbag Test for a Pornographic magazine. Lucas is a gambler and he'll always take a risk that has a reward, and he's determined for anything he puts his mind to. That determination gave him a free pass from the punishment due for that

*Tyler Williams*

contraband, it's unfair, but he finished with 5 sandbags, so he earned it.

That was one of our last physical training exercises we would do before deploying a few months later.

*September 1st, 2030*

12:46

## Just off the coast of Spain

“So,” I said with a question, “If you die, can I get your smokin’ hot girlfriend?” I turned to Acki, “Nah, If I die, you’re comin’ with me.” Acki replied, bumping his fist against mine.

An alarm blared as an orange light coned in the cockpit, “Lock-on,” Anderson, the pilot, called, “Flares,” Jackson, the co-pilot, bounced back as flares launched from the Osprey.

“How long ‘you think we got ‘till Europe’s our’s again?” Yinstz asked Jacup, leaning over, “I don’t know, a few months at the most?” he replied.

The alarm blared again, “Lock-on,” Anderson called, “Flares!,” Jackson called back as flares launched again.

A moment passed and the alarm blared again, “Another lock-on?” Anderson called, “We’re out

of flares!” Jackson climbed out of the cockpit, “BRACE FOR IMPACT-”

One second, I was sitting in the Osprey. The next, I was falling with my parachute struggling to open. The wind pierced my ears, as the world spun. I quickly fell into trees, which snapped my chute, plummeting me to the ground. I sprawled in and out of consciousness rapidly. My head spun, a foot from my face lay the upper half of Jameson. I crawled out from under the bloody propellor blade and stumbled to my feet before blacking out.

I came to with a bag over my head, then a violent shove into darkness.

I woke up in a concrete room, about 8 feet tall, long, and wide. On one side of the room was a metal door with 3 thick bars in a tiny window. Looking through it, there were more bars surrounding something, An arena maybe? After a few moments of peering through the bars, a man in a beret appeared, accompanied by 3 guards. The door made a loud clank before opening. “Good evening, American!” The One in

the beret smiled with a heavy accent, "My name is Ivushkin," he paused to think, "Warden, I believe is how you say it. Warden *Isiah* Ivushkin, not to be confused with the *general* Ivushkin *Maklev!*" "You know him?" I asked. He stopped, "Well, obviously. We are dear friends." He straightened his face, "Now, you will fight for me and my guests. Fight to prove your strength. Fight to survive!" He scowled. He was an older guy, in his 40s or 50s, "Let's see how your military performs." He turned on his heels, barking something in Russian. One of the guards shut the door on another. A man in dark drabby blue stood before me with a baton in his hand.

He marched up to me, and swung his baton from the right. I raised my arms, but, before I knew it, I was sprawled on the ground. The guard continued his beating, relentlessly. After an eternity, he seemed satisfied. Slamming the door on his way out. I slowly sat up, my forehead bleeding.

I exhaled deeply and leaned against the wall. "Damn..."

Time passed and an alarm blared like a freight train. The thick metal door opened abruptly, "Get up!" a guard yelled in an accent. Two

guards hoisted me by the shoulders and dragged me through the prison. A large metal door held by guards sat to the right of my cell. Inside, led to a flight of stairs and down a hall. It was an arena, in the middle of the prison, with huge bars blocking entrance into the pit. The guard locked the door behind me and handed me a rifle and pistol through the bars, "Don't even think about shooting me, *pig*." The guard barked in barely recognizable English.

The arena looked like a paintball field, a very small one. Looking up through another cell door in front of me, I could see hundreds of other prisoners sticking their heads and hands through the bars. The prison went about 15 stories high, snow melting on its way down, turning the ground into mud. The cell door in front of me held off the arena. Booing and cheering reverberated through the prison. It was frigid, but that's understandable for Russia.

Another alarm blared as the door in front of me opened, "DRAT'SYA!" A voice yelled through a speaker.

I put the pistol in the thigh pocket of my uniform, they didn't make us change but instead took our gear. Holding my rifle tighter I

had it in ready position and cautiously ventured from the cell.

I walked towards the right side and heard someone on my left side. I spun in that direction. The prisoner lunged from behind the wall with wide eyes. In pure fear and instinct, I squeezed the trigger. His body jerked violently right, then left, then back, smacking into the arena wall. A red mist clung to the cold air. The prisoners above and around erupted in cheers and boos.

In a very brief moment, he turned into a crimson corpse, limp against the wall.

The alarm blared once more and guards flooded in, dragging the corpse and throwing a hood over my head.

Once again, I was tossed into my pitch-black cell, the hood being ripped off before I was thrown.

They took the pistol from my pocket, so that idea disappeared. Time passed and I began to feel drowsy, I assumed it was night-time. The only sense of time I get is in the pit, the prison opens at the roof revealing the sky. Contrast this to my room, which has almost no light. I get very little light through the very thin crack at the bottom of the door.

My eyes finally adjusted, revealing a very bare resemblance of the room. Facing the door was a cold metal slab to my right, bolted into the wall, with another on top. Probably a bed. To the left was a bucket, I didn't need to guess what it was for.

The only problem with the bed was that there wasn't a mattress, just a pillow. The buzzing in my ears became relentless, "Yeah..." I muttered, just to break the silence, "Not sleeping there." I took the pillow and dropped it on the concrete, curling up. My drowsiness tugged lightly for me to sleep.

## Chapter 4: Danger Close

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“A small town is just southeast of here!” Lt Finn stabbed at an unrolled map, “Thanks to the help of survivors from other downed Ospreys, we can group up and triple the size of our platoon!”.

He had the map set down on a large rock, his voice the only thing that kept the team focused. A few soldiers were still disoriented from the crash and a couple never woke up. We salvaged what gear we could, and carried the men that couldn’t walk. My arm had finished its ventilation cycle, snapping back to place. I hefted Lucas and both our gear on my shoulders, plus extra.

We first arrived with 24 units:

5 medicals, 4 engineers, 10 infantry, and 5 intel.

6 men died, 3 of which, our medics, burned alive. 2 were radio guys, but their radios are

busted now. Royce had a radio too but he and Acki were taken; Soup is the only one with a functioning radio now. Jameson was the one who was sliced in two. One of our medics is missing a leg, leaving us with Aaron, our last healthy medic. About 6 of us had either a broken bone or were too concussed to know their own name.

We were in a small clearing in the trees just off the visible coast. As our men rallied and prepared to move toward a town labeled Carnoedo. We were inside of what is named A Reguira. Everyone gathered and ventured through the thick treeline. It would be about a 10-minute walk.

“Hey, Lucas,” I inquired with him on my back. Lucas, had an injured ankle and a piece of shrapnel sticking through his thigh, “Still with me?” I asked, he took a moment to respond, “Yeah,” He replied, “I’m not dead ‘till I say I am.”. I didn’t reply as the adrenaline rush had worn off already.

Time passed as the setting sun lit the sky in a dark orange haze, we were all walking in a single file line to not get lost. The soldier in front of me whispered, “We’ve got the treeline,” He whispered. We slowly broke formation as

we entered, "A farm?" Soup to my right asked. Looking around, the land we were standing on was farmland, acres of it.

"Almost there." Lt Finn said as we huddled closer, wading through the crops. The sky burned purple as the sun escaped the horizon.

We passed through rows of corn, then to wheat. Linear Movement Irrigation Sprinklers sat idle amidst the crops.

It looked very quiet here; there was no form of light and no sound; No wind, no birds, not even a cricket.

Making it past the farmland we entered a rural neighborhood. "Careful," a Sergeant called in a hushed tone, "We don't know how they'll react. They may think we're Spetsnaz". Everyone became more alert as our eyes quickly adjusted.

*CLICK CLICK*

A distinct sound reverberated behind us. All of us looked back to see a mass of silhouettes walking up behind us. Lt Finn clicked his fob 3 times, "Friendly." one of them called. "Captain," Lt Finn remarked, walking up to one of the

soldiers. The captain was a bit taller than him, about 6' 1", with stubble and thin, wire-framed glasses.

Meeting with Team Alpha would double the size of our platoon.

After meeting with the other platoon, the light from the sun was completely gone, making it pitch-black.

"Nods on," A soldier hushed. I had dual NVGs, others had Monos. We were all fitted with an NVG for the inevitable night. Returning to the ditch separating the farmland, I realized that the texture differed from dirt or grass. I knelt for a second to grab a handful of the substance.

I opened my fingers slightly and sifted the handful. The dirt fell through my torn gloves, leaving behind a handful of pebbles.

"Hey," A soldier asked tapping me, "We goin' or sniffin' the flowers?" He mocked, walking by, "*You'll regret that,*" I whispered to myself as I got up to catch him. Making my way to him I noticed he looked familiar in stature, "Hey," I said catching this guy. I tapped his shoulder and he turned to me. It was Yinstz, obviously.

We got past a concrete wall with bushes on top to reveal the rest of the neighborhood.

Street lamps were turned off and porchlights were vacant. All of us split up in twos, knocking on houses. Aaron, our sole medic, had carried Lucas for a bit after we met with Alpha. Lucas has been bandaged and Aaron safely removed the shrapnel but Lucas can only walk with help. Many of the houses had loud thumping inside every time one of us knocked followed by the cautious peek of a threatened person attempting to sleep in their house. A very brief moment of movement inside the house passed and the locks on the door opened loudly, "Hola?" A young woman asked quietly, peeking her head slightly in the crack of the door. Noticing the uniforms she slammed the door locking it. "Somos Americano!" Lucas threw at the closed door. The door clicked open again, "Tu eres Americano?" She asked, "Si." I replied. She hesitated, glancing at the thirty or so other soldiers in the dark. The door swung wide open.

The woman noticed Lucas's leg and asked about it, Lucas said it was okay and one of our medics did a great job. The woman allowed us the living room to stay in, Lucas got the couch and I took my spot on the floor right in front of the couch. Dropping into sleep quickly.

*Hours later...*

*FWOOM...*

A distinct sound rang from outside, like a firework launching. It was like a whistle but with a lower pitch.

*KRAKOOM!!!!*

A shockwave sent me over Lucas, smashing me through the wall. A very loud ring stung my ear as dirt and debris were all that could be seen flying in the very dim purple sky from the dawning sun. I gasped for air, my back and side stung like hell. Where was Lucas?

*FWOOM...*

The sound could be heard again. Looking up, a fast, light-gray streak could be seen in the air. About 10 feet in front of me, Lucas hobbled

over the mutilated wall he was smashed behind.

*KRAKOOM!!!*

Another explosion sent debris flying, further tearing apart the houses we were sleeping in. Screaming could be heard from the residents who had awakened.

*FWOOM...*

Again the sound was heard, "Mortar!" A soldier yelled from a distance followed by another explosion. The sun rose to reveal the chaos that had unfolded. I was knocked beside a stacked jersey barrier with sandbags on my side, doubling the thickness of the concrete wall.

The sound of gunfire penetrated the air. My right side burned, but seeing the gunfire in the distance propelled me to crawl to the other side of the wall.

My head pounded as I looked around to assess my surroundings. I sat with my back against the wall. Behind the rubble of a house far to my right was Lt Finn, Soup, and Aaron.

*FWOOM...*

The mortar launched. "SOUP!" I screamed to my right, "CALL AIR SUPPORT!". Soup looked at me and signaled his right hand up with his fingertips resting on his thumb then to his hand sideways pointing to the right with his thumb on top of his index finger, and lastly, a fist with his thumb to the side ended by him flicking his index and middle finger from his thumb and then holding them up, in quick succession.

Meaning: ETA; 12 minutes

An explosion could be heard to my left, leveling a 3 story house.

"AAGGGHHH!!!" a familiar voice cried. I turned to the wounded soldier seeing Yinstz about 20 meters from me, face-up, with a stick of rebar impaled through his mid-section. Rushing over to him behind the cover of another crumbling building, I made my way to assist Yinstz.

"Hey, hey, hey!" I said kneeling next to him.

"Help me, please!" He cried.

He was tossed over the wall of a building in construction, he landed on the wall of open rebar which caught him, broke loose, and

landed him here beside the wall, "I'm scared..."  
Yinstz cried. He didn't have his plates on.

"Listen to me," I ordered, "You're gonna be fine. Just focus on my voice.", "Don't leave me, please!" Yinstz cried, "CAN I GET A DAMN MEDIC OVER HERE!!" I screamed, looking around. Aaron was pinned behind the house with Finn and Soup.

*FWOOM...*

Yinstz clawed at the rebar, unable to look down. His breath was rapid.

"I can't feel anything!" His voice cracked, "Am I dying?"

"No." I lied, "No, you're gonna be fine".

*KRAKOOM!!!*

The mortar blasted everything back. My head spun, I was tossed about 10 feet. Everything burned, I choked on the dusty air.

Yinstz?

I searched for Yinstz through the dust. I stumbled forward and finally found him. His body convulsed as he choked on his own blood.

My vision focused. The rebar was missing. His hands trembled, before they limped. Time seemed to slow as the sudden realization of what happened settled in my train of thought.

“This is Raptor-One Actual, be advised you are danger-close, repeat, you are danger-close.” A voice warned through Soup's radio behind me, “Copy, danger close approved.” Soup replied.

The jet screamed overhead. It's gatling ripping the tranquil buildings apart.

“Alpha-Two, confirm enemy kia?” The pilot's voice crackled through the radio, “Target up, 400 meters North-East-East of my pos.” Soup barked as the jet made a wide bank. “Roger. Linen' up for another pass.” The pilot replied. Aaron had grabbed Lucas and stayed with Lt Finn where Soup came from, “Raptor 1 comin' around for strafe.” The pilot called as the air was ripped by the sound of its Gatling and the explosion of rockets.

I looked at Yinstz and grabbed his dog tags, “I'll make peace for you,” Soup had yanked my collar as an incoming mortar was aimed for our position, “Good effect on target.” Soup commended. “Good-Fickin-Hit.” He emphasized

each word. "Raptor-One RTB, good luck," The pilot concluded.

The Spetsnaz fire had ceased and all that was left was the crying of people who had lost their homes and loved ones.

"Sierra, this is Alpha 2 Actual, requesting med-evac and reinforcement!" Finn called into Soup's radio, "Roger, Alpha. ETA 30 mikes." Sierra Command replied.

Time passed as we gathered our fallen members and prepared for the medevac.

The helicopters that came were Chinooks that dropped off tanks, soldiers, and supplies.

3 Blackhawks came and dropped off dozens more men, with the unloading Blackhawks turning into medical as medics took the wounded soldiers inside.

Lucas got on one of the helicopters and I followed him, looking for the pilot. I could barely hear my own voice over the rotor blades.

"How did we get all of this so fast?" I asked, shouting over the helicopter. The pilot looked confused and tossed me a pair of headphones. I winced at my side as I caught them. "What'd you say?" The pilot crackled through the headset. "I asked where this came from?" I

repeated. He glanced at me and replied, "Africa,". "Africa!?" I exclaimed. "Yeah," He replied, "We've had bases set up since the Russo-Ukrainian War. No one's been on Russia's side.", "That's impossible- the flight ti-" he nodded toward my fist, cutting me off, "What's that?". I looked at the dog tags clenched in my fist, "Yinstz tags." My voice was shallow. He exhaled deeply. Then his gaze shot to my side.

"Woah, kid," He pointed at my side, "Did you get shot?" I followed his gaze. My entire side was covered with blood. A jagged tear split my uniform. "I- I don't know," I admitted.

"Jeez..." he muttered, "Just sit there, the adrenaline's the only thing keepin' you up.". I sank into the seat. My head began to feel lighter.

I strapped in next to Lucas, who was on a stretcher, and settled for another long ride. A question bugged me: How did they come from Africa, in just 30 minutes? The pilot got in the cockpit and looked back at everyone in the cabin, "Wait a minute," He looked at me, "You're that Winston kid, aren't you? You've got that robot arm, right?" He asked, my uniform sleeve covered my arm. "Yeah," I rolled up my sleeve,

*Tyler Williams*

"I'm just... Unlucky.", "Well, word is, you're like a super soldier." He chuckled. "That's pushing it." I replied.

The pilot was black, in his late 40s, and wore a light gray beard.

When I get back home, I'd deliver the tags to Yinstz's family, because Yinstz couldn't make it back himself.

## Тихое небо

---

Russian words echoed through my skull, loud, demanding. I'm terribly sore, but almost floating at the same time.

A deafening alarm woke me up instantly. I sat up and rubbed my sore shoulder. I thought it was time to fight again, but instead, it was time to eat. My cell door unlocked, swinging open, along with every cell in the prison. I was on the second floor, so I had to walk down a short flight of stairs to get to the cafeteria. There were 24 cells per floor, 12 on each side, with two giant, metal doors to tie it together. It was elliptical, the whole place wrapped around the arena.

I'm in a cell labeled Ячейка 32. Which I think means *room 32*. "Komnaty sem', dvenadtsat', devyatnadtsat' i tridtsat' odin. Vy budete dezhurit' na kukhne." a voice said in a demanding tone.

Kitchen Duty.

They didn't call my number.

The prison was dark and drabby—void of life. It was silent, no one shouted or fought. None of the prisoners had the energy to fight. The walls were slick and grimy of condensation. I walked up to get whatever food I was given, I was expecting a slice of bread, or maybe a potato. But instead, I got a ladle of very unappetizing, piss-brown slop.

I took an empty seat and debated hard about eating the slop. Using the spoon, I gathered a spoonful of the substance and lifted it. The goopy slop dripped from the side. I figured it had to be good if everyone else was literally killing each other for this. I hesitantly put the spoon in my mouth and was immediately shocked. It looked very unappetizing but tasted like chili and crackers. I decided to scarf down the rest of my portion, feeling the hunger subside. After I finished the chili slop, I looked to my left to see another man in a camo uniform. I thought I was the only one on this table, the dopamine high from the food propelled me, "Sup," I said to the man. His uniform was covered in a dark, chalky substance, so the camo was hard to recognize.

The man turned to me with a stone-hard look. I froze. I knew that face. "Acki?!" My voice jumped, "You're alive?!". "Royce?" his voice barely left the table. "Where were you?" I asked. What happened to him? His cheeks sank with dark spots under his eyes.

"What cell are you in? Did you know there are bunks in the cells? Mines empty." I began, relieved. "Royce, listen." Acki leaned in, "They make us fight.". "Precisely why you should join my cell." I replied quickly. "What? This isn't just some prison." his eyes darted around the cafeteria, "They call names, you go in the pit, and they experiment on the leftovers.". I leaned back in disbelief, then sighed. "Well..." I bounced back, "I know they won't make *us* fight, not now at least. What did they do to you? I'm a higher rank, right?-", "Was," Acki cut me off, "Was a higher rank. 'Master Sergeant' doesn't mean Jack in here. This is death-, this is worse than death." Acki pressed his finger to the table. "We're just lab rats now...".

Another freight train blared and guards rushed in, ordering prisoners back to their cells.

Two prisoners were called to the arena, both taken by the guards and brought into the 5-meter drop of the arena.

One of the prisoners was tall, in his 20s, with slick black hair and stubble on his chin. The other one was shorter and in his 40s. One thing stuck among these people. "They aren't just military?" I asked turning to Acki, "Yeah," he replied, "Anyone who disapproves of Russia's reign will be sent here. To fight.". The guards gave the prisoners their weapons and opened the doors to let them fight, "DRAT'SYA!" The voice ordered. The tall one slowly stepped out and cautiously peeked around the left side, holding the rifle awkwardly. The older one ran to the right side to sneak up on the tall one. Whoops and boos could be heard from the hundreds of prisoners. The tall one turned to the right side after the left side was empty, intercepting the older one and opening fire. The older one rag-dolled, landing face-first in the mud.

The alarm blared again and guards rushed in to remove the prisoners and take them away. We weren't ordered back to our cells, meaning another fight was about to take place.

A moment of silence went on as a conversation could be seen through the dark glass of an overseer's office.

"Matthew Elbeleszcak, Alexander Acki!" The voice called, guards combed through the crowds searching for them. One of the guards came up beside us and mistook me for Acki. Handling me through the doors to the pit. My opponent had the same stature as me but had blonde hair, contrary to brown. I was tossed an M16 with no carry handle and a sling, an MP443, and a karambit. "DRAT'SYA!" The voice ordered again. The door swung open and the alarm blared. The grach weighed down my thigh pocket, and the karambit felt tiny in my left hand. I held the m16 in my right hand and rested the barrel of it on my left wrist. The prisoner ran up the left side, each step heavier than the last. I prepared by slinging the m16 around my shoulder and laying my back against a wall on the side he was running up. The prisoners quickly fell silent, my heart beating in my ear. The prisoners knew exactly what I was going to do. I switched the karambit to my right hand. His footsteps got closer and closer. I lunged at him as soon as he stepped past my line of visibility. My knife connected, ripping his right armpit. He yelled in pain, I

spun him around, but he grabbed my right arm with his left. I took my free hand and pried his arm off of mine, continuing my attack by slicing his left armpit followed immediately by his neck. Matthew dropped to the floor. A bell rang and guards rushed in again, grabbing me by my arms. I soaked up the imagery of the sky to print in my mind on the black canvas that is my cell walls. I couldn't even tell if I was blinking or not, and sometime after I was thrown in there, I fell asleep.

Another dreamless sleep.

September 3, 2030

7:36...

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“Ah! There you are!” An all too familiar voice exclaimed. My eyes blurred to focus as I saw a man with messy brown hair and blue-silver eyes looming over me.

“Phil?” I asked with a dehydrated voice, “How do you feel? Still groggy?” he asked putting his hands together, “Fine,” I replied, “I feel different.” I said with uncertainty, “Well, the new prosthetic is lighter, that may be it.” Phil said. Yeah, my arm.

I flexed the much lighter arm, it reacted a bit faster than the older one. Phil crossed his arms, “Also, it could be from the stupendous amount of blood you lost.” He added.

I jerked upright, “What!?” I exclaimed. I was in the same room I was when I got the first prosthetic.

“How much blood did I lose? And how!?” I insisted, “Actually, not that much, I was just testing your response.” He pointed at the prosthetic. “Thanks to the boost in healing

from your smaller amount of mass, and possibly from the Durny, you should heal from that cut in about a week or two.” He said, “Smaller mass?” I asked, “Yeah,” he replied, “You're missing about... 8% of your body mass.” He lifted my prosthetic, “It’s not much, but it makes a difference. Anyway, this arm is now coated with silicone for a more human feel, it has a different structure too.” He said. “For starters, It has a skeletal support *array* that adds extra durability. I don’t know what you did out there but you bent the last arm by about 4 centimeters!” He rambled, “Anyway, It now has a Carbotanium shell, instead of aluminum. It features Epinephrine and Morphine doses when, and if, needed.”, “Also,” he added, “The computer is more advanced and has a specified keypad to use for direct insight of, maybe, diagnostic or injection.” He finished by pressing the button that flicked a tab that projected the hologram with a few buttons below like a TV remote on my arm. “How will I know how much adrenaline I have?” I asked. “It’ll tell you your remainder after the dose, I doubt you’ll use all of it very quickly, though. Taking the full dosage could be lethal.” He warned, “Anyway, I better let you go,” he said handing me a stack of folded clothes, “And you

might need to return this.” He held up Yinstz’s dog tags, “Yeah... Thanks.” I took the clothes and tags.

I left the room and walked down the hallway looking for another bathroom.

After I had changed, I looked outside the window just across from the bathroom entrance. It had just started to rain and fog. I had already decided to return the dog tags to Yinstz’s family and at least let them know how he died.

I grabbed a bouquet and headed for Yinstz’s house, the rain picking up on my way there and slowing down when I stopped in front of their house.

Their house was more rural than others, with very few neighbors and tending to be a little more old-school.

As I walked up the driveway, it sounded like someone could be chopping wood in the backyard.

I stood frozen at the door for what felt like an eternity. My hand hovered around the wooden door. *“What the hell do I even say? I’m sorry for your son’s death—here are some flowers and his dog tags?!”. My throat*

tightened. I clenched my jaw and forced myself to ring the doorbell.

A brief moment passed and someone rushed to the door, Yinstz's mother. Her smile faded immediately, "You're not Alex?" She said, "No..." I replied, "But there's something that you need to know." I informed her as she let me inside. Maya, Yinstz's mother, had set us down in the living room, two couches faced diagonally towards each other. I sat opposite her, Elias, Yinstz's father, walked in and sat next to Maya. "So, he's gone, isn't he?" Maya asked with concern, "That is why I'm here," I replied setting Yinstz's dog tags on the table, "I wanted to do it myself since," I paused for a moment, feeling my throat swell, "I was the one right there when he died." Maya's eyes welled with tears as she clenched the dog tags. Elias stood without a word and walked outside to continue his woodwork. I faintly heard the axe chop wood outside.

Maya on the contrary would laugh at anything funny and cry at anything sad. That's where Yinstz got it from.

"How did he die?" Maya asked after a moment of silence, "Rebar," I replied, "A nearby mortar strike launched him into a stray piece of rebar. A few moments later, another nearby mortar

knocked both of us, dislodging the rebar, and quickly suffocating him.” I answered leaning my head down, “Was his body recovered?” Maya asked, I took a moment to respond, “I believe so, I’ll let you know as soon as possible.” I replied.

Maya took a drink from a glass on the table, “Was he any good?” She asked. I blinked, “What?”. She hesitated, “...Did I say that wrong?”. My chest tightened, “Oh, no.” I replied. “He was good,” I swallowed, “Matching Royce. He was one of the first guys I had become friends with when I joined. I’m not sure how many confirmed kills he has in total but it didn’t matter too much to him.” I replied, “If you guys need any help with anything, I’d be glad to head over here.” I said looking at a message on my phone.

*Dr.Psychopath - Turn off Do Not Disturb and pick up the phone!!!*

Phil again?

“Thank you,” Maya replied as I left.

The rain had slowed to a slight drizzle as I walked to my car. The moment I shut my door,

my phone rang, "I wish I stopped listening to this guy," I mumbled to myself, picking up the phone, "What's up, Phil?" I asked putting the phone to my ear,

"It's Lucas," The voice replied, "Get down here man, or I'll drag you down here myself!". "Glad you're feeling better," I replied, "I'll be right there!" Lucas hung up as I fumbled the keys into the ignition.

Knock, knock,

Lucas grinned as I stepped in, "There he is!". "Hey!" Lucas exclaimed, "So, as I thought," I mocked, looking at Lucas's ankle brace, "You were being a big baby.". Lucas gasped, "Rude!". The nurse attending him shook her head with a smirk as she walked out. "*Hottie!*" Lucas mouthed, pointing at the nurse behind his hand, "Alright, Nick Cannon," I chuckled, "How do you feel?" I asked sitting in a chair beside his bed, he sat up promptly, "Oh, fine," he said, waving his hand, "Just a mild headache and crutches for the next two weeks!" he exclaimed pointing at his leg, "I hear you just woke up? From what?" I asked. Lucas lifted his gown to his left side and pointed at a fresh line of stitches. "Stray bullet," He replied setting the gown back down. I frowned. "Jesus, man. What happened?". "Turns out I got shot," He said, "Didn't know until they found it.". "Agh," I grimaced, "Similar thing here but it was shrapnel from that house," I lifted my shirt on the right side and pointing at the long line of

stitches. Setting my shirt back down, "When you're feeling better," I proposed, "Call me and we'll get a drink," I said looking back at the door and leaning in, "And you can bring that nurse too." I said laughing, "Don't tell Kate I said that," My face straightened, "Agh, whatever," he replied waving his hand as my phone rang.

"Speaking of the devil." I said picking up the phone and leaving the room.

"What'd she say?" Lucas asked as I walked back into the room, "Nothing much," I answered, "She said she was out of town and she'll be here around Friday. She also heard that you were in the hospital; She was asking if I came to see you." I said, "Well, that's thoughtful of her," He said smiling and rolling his eyes.

As I walked out of Lucas's room, Phil passed and I stopped him mid-stride. He held an empty cup of coffee, with heavy eyebags. "Hey," I said with a question. Phil looked at me intently, "How many others are like me," I asked pointing at my arm. He caught on to my question and nodded slowly, "Not very many- four or five, maybe." He said, "One Marine has a full leg and thigh, he's demo so it helps." I flicked his wrist,

checking the time, "Now, I gotta go. On Friday, we'll see how you're doing." He patted my shoulder and walked off, "Go get a coffee!" He added, glancing back.

"You know what?" I said to myself, "I might do just that,". It's been a minute since I've been to somewhere like Dutch Bros. I used to go there a bit too much.

## Ding, ding

The doorbell resounded as I opened the door. A few familiar faces looked in my direction. I placed 15 dollars on the counter, "Jacup Winston, Du-" I was cut off, "Dutch Canyon, right?" The cashier asked with a smile. He looked new to me, "You were gonna say Dutch Canyon?", "Yeah... With whipped cream, thanks." I replied, taking a seat in the back corner.

Dutch Bros had a huge expansion around 2024, placing restaurants everywhere, drive-in exclusive. About a year or two later those places expanded further and featured a dine-in. Their new addition of toast and bagels is nice, but I don't exactly eat here.

I haven't been here since a few weeks before I enlisted, I was with Kate the last time.

"Your coffee, sir." A young waiter named Matt sat my coffee down.

*Tyler Williams*

When I finished my coffee, I left a 10-dollar tip and went straight to the grocery store and brought everything needed to Mr and Mrs.Yinstz.

The next week went by fast and Lucas finally recovered, mostly.

When Lucas and I were younger we used to always crash at his parent's house, they always loved seeing us hang out. That's where Lucas went after the hospital.

18:49

Knock, knock, knock,

I took a step back from the door, "Hey, man," Lucas said, opening the door to let me in, "Feeling any better?" I asked, "For the most part," He replied, "I'm out of the boot." He

remarked looking down and moving his ankle, "Still hurts, though." He complained, "So what's up?" He asked, "Well, if you're feeling any better-", "YES!" Lucas exclaimed, reading my thoughts, "I thought you were kidding, let's get that drink now!" Lucas said with a grin.

19:00

"You ready yet?" I asked waiting at the bottom of the stairs, "This isn't prom, princess." I mocked as Lucas walked down the stairs in his military formals, "Let's do this!" He said, skipping the last two steps and opening the door, "Ladies first!" He grinned. That nurse Lucas was fantasizing about didn't come along.

Stepping into the Bar & Grill was like walking into a Texas Roadhouse, "Gimme two Martini's," Lucas smiled, turning to me, "Let me get one more for my friend." Lucas laughed, "Oh, I'm not drinking!" I said, "Oh, yes you are!" Lucas bounced back, "Nope," I replied, "Yup!" He said as the bartender put the glass in front

of me, "Come on," He grinned and scooted the glass, "I said I'd buy *you* a drink," I said, scooting the glass back, "Come on..." Lucas slid the glass back. I'm not doing this again. He looked to the bartender, "Got any ibuprofen?". The bartender shook his head, Lucas then looked at me.

I sighed and pulled a tiny bottle from my thigh pocket. He thanked me and crushed it up, sprinkling it into the martini.

He looked at me, then the drink, then back at me and pushed the drink toward me. The annoyance got to me and I thought for a moment, Lucas slid the glass toward me a little further.

I wasn't trying to spiral into this again, "Fine," I caved, downing the glass, "There!" Lucas laughed, "Was that so hard?", "Yes," I replied firmly, "It tastes like dirt!", "You'll get used to it!" Lucas replied signaling another glass behind my view, "Another one?" The bartender said, placing the glass in front of me, "Fine." I caved, downing the next glass. It felt good. Never have I felt so dehydrated. I called the bartender, "Give me something stronger!".

*Tyler Williams*

September 14, 2030

The smooth buzz of an orchestra of xylophones, wind, and string instruments played, "Ugh..." I groaned. A pounding headache hindered any more rest as the song intruded my thoughts.

I didn't want to open my eyes, but out of curiosity, I had to know who the conductor of this masterpiece was.

The symphony finally stopped.

I blinked a few times but the lighting didn't change, were my eyes open or closed?

The 'I just woke up' grogginess wore off slowly but the jackhammer to my skull insisted.

The orchestra started again, it sounded so familiar, but from where? Or what?

A blinding glare pierced the darkness. It was my phone. I grabbed my phone, the beacon of light burned my eyes.

5:31

"Who would be calling me this early?" I thought to myself. I didn't have any voicemail so I checked my missed calls.

5:30 am

Harvard Radcliffe

Missed, incoming call

The latest call...

The words seemed familiar to me as if I knew them. Harvard...? Radcliffe... That's my CO. Wait...

"OH, SHIT!" I screamed, jumping out of bed. "Stop yelling, please." A familiar, female voice groaned from the other side of the bed. I stumbled over clothes strewn across the floor, "*What the hell happened?*" The thought echoed as I found pieces of my uniform in the pitch-black room. The layout was too familiar, and I quickly found the door.

Shutting it quietly, I dialed General Radcliffe back, "Sir?" I said into the phone, "Winston!" He, *kindly*, greeted me, "How long did it take you to notice your phone ringing?! Is Smith with you?! He didn't pick up!" Radcliffe's voice was sharp, impatient, "Uhh... He may be with me?" I replied, "Well, Get him. *NOW!*", "I'll grab him, I- don't hang up." I stuttered, climbing the stairs to Lucas's bedroom.

Lucas's bedroom was to the left of the stairs and the last room down the hall.

"Lucas!" I barged into his room. Lucas shot straight up like a reanimated corpse, "YES, SIR!" He jumped out of bed and into an army crawl, "What's going on?" He slowly asked, still lying on the floor. "It's Radcliffe!" I replied frantically, "Is Smith with you now?" Radcliffe's voice shouted through the speaker. Lucas slowly got up and brushed himself off. "Yes, sir." Lucas and I replied in sync. "I hate to give this assignment over the phone, but we've just gotten a tip regarding a boathouse in Germany. I need you at my office ASAP. You two are the only ones I trust enough for this." He hung up. The room quickly fell silent, "Well? Let's go!" Lucas broke the silence, finding his uniform. We rushed out the door.

I popped Tylenol like candy.

Chapter 5:

Boathouse...

September 14, 2030

7:32

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“I’m glad you two are here, I hope you’ve gotten enough rest.” Radcliffe started. Lucas and I were sitting in Radcliffe’s office, in chairs that opposed his desk. Radcliffe was wearing his formal attire with 3 stars on his shoulders, and a few medals on his left pec.

“Now, as I’ve told you, we’ve received an anonymous tip and, obviously, we’ve traced the tip back to an urban apartment.” He slid his phone to face us. Demgjacun apartments. Our

current assignment is in... "Kollicker Ufer?" I asked. "Near the coast of Germany," He said, "There's a boathouse, as the tip suggests, and in the house should be supplies, weaponry, and..." Radcliffe lowered his head, "'Cargo'". "Why only send us?" I asked, "Because," Radcliffe said, "This is a covert mission and you two are the most compatible I have. We can't trust the tip, so we'll drop you two off via Little Bird about two miles from the target, you'll be geared with suppressed weapons and ghillie for concealment. We don't know how many Spetz will be down there, so be careful. We will be on standby at a base a few miles from the boathouse in case the tip is correct. After this assignment, we'll send in a couple of teams to infiltrate the apartment." Radcliffe continued, "Smith, you'll be geared with C4 explosives *only* if things go south. Winston, you'll be overwatch." I nodded. I have to find some coverage and accommodate for wind, making sure Lucas isn't lit up before he gets there. "Expect high enemy contact, so maintain a low profile." He finished.

We left to the armory to gear up, "So," Lucas inquired, snapping a mag into his M27. "You don't remember last night?" He asked. I

slid the bolt of my M40 back, the metal clicking in place, "No?" I replied confused. "Should I?". "Interesting," he said, dodging my question. "You sure you're up for this?" I asked, "Yeah," Lucas replied, "I'm fine. But what about you?". I groaned, my annoyance grew annoyingly quick. "I'm never doing that again." I complained, pointing at Lucas, "Out of every day, *this* had to be the day for me to be hungover." I fitted into the ghillie suit. Rubbed my forehead, "Feel like I got hit by a train.". Lucas grinned, "You drank like you wanted to.".

## 13:28, September 15th

The sky was heavy, overcast and cold, it was meant to storm. The sight would have been beautiful from the 'Bird but the clouds made everything foggy and gray, even the trees looked lifeless.

"This is as far as I can safely take you!" The pilot called as he lowered the helicopter over a small road stretching along *Kollicker Ufer*.

Lucas sat on the opposite side of the Little Bird to me, hopping off when the distance between the helicopter and the ground was only a few feet.

“You still upset?” Lucas asked as the helicopter departed, “Yeah,” I said, switching the safety from my gun, “But not at you.” I said, “More at myself,” I paused to think, “for not standing up to you.” I chuckled, changing my tone. “It was my fault for pushing you into it, but you’ve gotta loosen up sometimes, man.” He said, “yeah,” I replied, “I guess, ever since... You know.” I trailed. It would be about half an hour before we made it to an overwatch of the boathouse. A long moment of silence lingered between us until we both stopped and looked at each other, “Hear that?” I asked in a hushed tone, “No,” He corrected, “I feel it.”, “Find somewhere to hide!” I called diving into a ditch to the right of the road as headlights became visible. Lucas jumped to the left, lying behind a thicker batch of trees. I concealed myself, blending into the tall grass.

It was a cargo truck, which slowly patrolled by, indistinct Russian chatter rang from inside the truck as it passed. “I don’t think they’ll hear us,” Lucas whispered over the mic. “Don’t move yet,” I replied. The truck slowly passed, and

when the truck could no longer be seen we got up and continued our expedition towards the boathouse.

The trees slowly and slightly broke open, revealing the boathouse, stretching from the shore up to the cliffside. Normally, the entrance area to rent a boat or docking space would be at the cliffside. Stairs led down to the shore where the boats were held. The entrance area was far down the hill from where we were. An overgrown, torn, and worn-down house sat near the slope of the hill, this would be my vantage point. Inside, a full tree had grown in the middle of the house, "Alright, let's set up," I said in a quieter tone, moving a long and old table in front of a window perfectly overlooking the boathouse, "I'll watch you, just be careful, alright?" I warned holding up my fist, prompting a fist bump, and he returned. The table was a bit taller than the window so I flipped the bipod mount down slightly outward, locking it in place so I could get more vertical movement.

"I see you," I said over the mic, watching Lucas scurry along a tall patch of grass, "I see 4 tangos," Lucas whispered, lying down and quickly becoming an invisible patch of ground. "If they line up, collateral. I'll take the rest." He whispered.

The four guys were scattered in front of the entrance, they looked like they were conversing. The Spetsnaz had converted a civilian boathouse into a military naval checkpoint. Only, there weren't very many boats coming in and out, which is odd. If this place was storing weaponry, there would be a bit of a heavier defense, right? I didn't think too much of that.

"Armed coming through," Lucas warned as 2 humvees and another cargo truck passed by the boathouse, dropping off about a dozen armed Spetsnaz who filed into the entrance. "They're definitely protecting something," I said, "I don't think clearing this place is going to be an easy option," Lucas said.

A few years ago a huge storm had ripped the trees and rocks from their resting places, making a bit of a wider area. About a decade ago, this assignment wouldn't be possible. "Be careful when you get in there," I warned, "Toss your tear gas through the skylights, I can pick off what I can.", "After the entrance, I won't be visible," Lucas added, "Then send them up here." I replied as one of the 4 entrance guards walked off about 10 feet from the others, taking a spot behind some bushes and in front

of a tree, "Guy on a bathroom break," Lucas said. When he stopped moving I pulled the trigger, watching the body fall and disappear among the bushes, "One down," I said, "The two on the left are lined up perfectly, get ready." I said aiming around the head to collateral, "Now," I said, squeezing the trigger, ripping through the first one's head and landing inside the second one's shoulder, Lucas shot down the guy on the right, "He's still up," I warned as Lucas fired his rifle into the collateral survivor. "Clean," Lucas remarked sarcastically running up to the side of the entrance, "Let me know if more come by, I'll hide these guys," Lucas said, dragging 2 inside of a bush to the right of the entrance.

Lucas turned to me and held a thumbs up, cautiously entering the first building.

"First buildings clear, no one's here." Lucas said, "There are stairs, I might get caught here." He whispered, "I'll climb the railing onto the roof of the boathouse." Lucas proposed.

A moment passed.

"Ok, I'm in position... Goodnight," Lucas whispered, popping in the tear gas through the skylights one after the other. The guards started shouting and coughing running up the stairs. Gunshots could be heard as some

Spetsnaz came out to the entrance, "There are some outside here, I'll pick them off." I said, downing one wheezing soldier after the other. Some of the Spetsnaz had passed out, which made it easier for me, "All clear down here, what about you?" Lucas asked, "Just wrapping things up," I replied, reloading my M40, "This place is pretty straightforward," Lucas remarked, "There's a yacht and a couple of RHIB-looking dinghies." Lucas said, "There's nothing but a few wooden crates here." Lucas said, prying open the first crate. A bit of grunting from Lucas and a loud pop could be heard over the mic, "On one of the pontoons here, I think I found the 'cargo' Radcliffe was talking about. There are tons of crates here." Lucas said, going silent for a long moment, "They all have the same thing," Lucas said.

"AGH!" Lucas screamed, spitting, "Lucas?" I replied, "You alright?" I asked. "NO! THESE AREN'T DRUGS!" Lucas exclaimed, "What? How?" I replied, "Did you taste it?" I asked, "What? No!" Lucas replied slowly, "That's crazy, it just... Had some kind of meeting with my tongue." He replied, "What is it then?" I asked, "I think it's fertilizer and... Cat piss?"

Lucas replied, "The Spetz must love their plants." Lucas said sarcastically, "Why would they have fertilizer there?" I asked, "I don't..." Lucas trailed off, "...Know, give me a second." He said going silent for a long moment.

"Jacob..." Lucas's voice dropped low and quiet, "The boats..." His voice lingered with dread, "Th-... They're rigged.". I sat up from the window, "Get out of there!" I shouted, "Drop your C4s, your weapons, I don't care! Get-" A huge explosion snuffed the air from my lungs, sending me back into the far wall behind me, my rifle clattered next to me. My ears rang violently. The sky was lit with a burning orange and yellow, blinding me from thick overcast, to cloudless, Navaden afternoon.

My heart sank.

"LUCAS!!!" I screamed. I stumbled forward, back to the window. Debris lie everywhere but the boathouse. "LUCAS DO YOU COPY!?" I shouted into the mic. I stepped back, "No, no, no, no, no, no..." My throat swelled, I couldn't breathe. "Lucas, This isn't funny, man!". He didn't reply. Lucas... Is gone.

I slid back into the far wall, and limped my head between my knees, praying Lucas would finally respond.

I eventually flipped the broadcast on my radio, and took a deep, unsteady breath.

"This is Alpha 2 Actual... Requesting evac..." I swallowed hard. If I stalled, then I'll give Lucas enough time to reply. Nothing came back.

"...Minus one." My voice cracked.

How could I let this happen?

The air grew heavier and heavier as Lucas stayed silent. "Alpha, this is Victor-2 received, heading your way for evac," The pilot finally called, "You said minus one?" He asked with heavy concern. "Lucas..." I inhaled, "He's gone... It's just me." I leaned my head against the wall. The pilot took a long moment to respond, "Copy."

Something brewed inside, boiled. A tsunami of pain and anguish. I clenched my fists.

"GOD-FUCKING-DAMNIT!" I screamed, slamming my fist into the wall.

*Tyler Williams*

Chapter 6:

## Железные дороги

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It's been about a week and I think I've gotten the rhythm of this prison. They don't make the same prisoners fight again on the same day and if you win over 5 consecutive games, you move up a floor to the good cells with an actual mattress.

Rumor has it that if you somehow win 100 games you'll get your freedom, I highly doubt that. Since the game with that Matthew guy, everyone has dubbed me "*Kunai*" for whatever reason they see a resemblance.

Every cycle (I don't know exactly what times) consists of sleeping, eating, fighting, and working in that exact order. The works are in the categories of Kitchen Duty, Cave Mining, and Railroad Work.

Kitchen Duty - Cells are chosen to make and mix the slop we get and clean up afterward. To prevent the prisoners from poisoning other prisoners, there are no chemicals that are harmful or any that can be mixed to be harmful. This is the easiest job.

Cave Mining - Half of the cells are chosen to mine and find anything. Every mineral has its own reward. Finding something like a small gem might get you out of the job for the day. This is the wealthiest job.

Railroad Duty - The remaining prisoners are sent outside under rotating surveillance to build a railroad. This railroad is very long but was stopped due to funding decades ago. Prisoners are given sledgehammers and are chained to constrain their movement and ensure their work. This is the toughest job.

The thing with the Russian guards here is that security is a little on the minimum, only about 20 guards rotate the perimeter. This prison is huge, 20 men set out along about 20 acres is a

lot of distance. Railroad Duty is the best time for me to escape.

The guards are separated by around an acre each. The only downside out here is that it's almost completely flat and blank white terrain. Luckily, I'm not wearing any bright colors, but MARPAT is still very much visible in an eternal white landscape. I plan to attempt to stow a pistol from my fight and take it with me on my escape, the only problem is the chains.

Everyone receives a new chain each time they are sent out here, to prevent weathering or wearing. So I get newly conditioned chains each time I'm sent out here which is unfortunate since, for my escape, I would need to use the tools we're provided to break the chains.

I plan to escape when the guards are in the perfect position where the least amount of guards may be visible. I would see about 4-5 guards at a time, but there is a position of perfect timing where only 3 are visible for about a minute or two. This will give me enough time to run past the guard line (the invisible line that the guards patrol on) and make my way to escape. I don't know what they'll do to me if I get caught. I tell myself I won't. But still... I wonder. Acki is on board with

my plan but is skeptical about my observations.

The way I'll have to escape will be awkward and risky. I'll have to break the chain with a sledgehammer, the extreme cold makes the metal brittle, and susceptible to a few heavy swings—atleast, it should.

I'll spread my stance over the rail as far as the chains will let me, resting the chain against the metal. Acki will be helping to speed up the process by also slamming the chain, hopefully the chain will malleate and snap.

I believe we have railroad stakes which could be helpful, placing them perfectly to snap the chains.

When I escape, Acki and I have agreed that I'll find help and rescue everyone at the prison.

*Tyler Williams*

*Tyler Williams*

*The flight back home felt so long. I never in a million years thought I would return to Lucas's family without Lucas. I'm afraid of how Kate would react. I see her face as I tell her. How would I tell her that her brother died, and the one man who was there couldn't do anything to help?*

*This is all my fault. If only I had caught on to the signs earlier. The security. The fertilizer. If only.... Then he wouldn't be in pieces.*

Chapter 7:

## Stormhouse

September 21, 2030

6:40

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“Sir, you have to put me on the mission,” I demanded,  
“You know I can’t do that,” General Radcliffe replied,  
“Please, I have to. Trust me,” I pleaded.  
I was standing in his office a few hours after I landed, “Please. It’s all my fault he’s gone,” I curled my fists, “I need to catch this guy.”,  
“Look at you, Winston,” He replied, leaning back into his chair, “You’re in grief, I can’t let you go.”,  
“GODD-” I stopped myself, putting my hands over my head,  
“This is the last time,” I explained, “If I don’t get any lead then I’m done.” I held up my hand,  
“Is that so?” Radcliffe leaned forward.

"I'll resign." I coerced, "If I don't get any type of lead, I'll resign.",

"Is that a threat?" Radcliffe asked, leaning back.

"No, sir." I replied, "This guy abetted in killing Lucas." I said, looking down.

"I understand how you feel, I don't blame you," Radcliffe sat up, debating.

Radcliffe finally sighed, "A few hundred meters north of Dengjiacun," Radcliffe caved, "Is a suburb – tons of apartment buildings, About 15 stories high. We don't know exactly what room he's in but we're certain he's on the top floor of the middle complex."

"Who's 'he'?" I asked,

"The tip," He replied, "We traced it back to a man named Shang Wu.",

"Who's on the team?" I asked, Radcliffe pulled out a folder, "Not many people you know, but Billcap, Finn, and Soup are in it. There'll be two teams, Alpha-Bravo. You'll be a part of Bravo with Billcap, and a few other units, infiltrating and interrogating Wu. Finn may change that based on the situation," Radcliffe took a breath.

"I shouldn't be doing this, but I *do* trust you, Good luck. Lieutenant Finn will brief you further." He rubbed his temple.

“Listen up!” Lieutenant Finn gathered everyone. His voice seemed distant to me. I took a good look around the crew in the room. Someone’s missing.

“Silence and concealment is key. It’ll be midnight, limiting the possibility of us being seen. We have zero detail on if the entire apartment is armed but we believe it’s safe to say it is not. Shang Wu is known as a dealer of arms and drugs so we can be prepared for if his apartment is armed. Single file and caution! Alpha, you’ll watch external, we don’t want Wu to escape. Bravo, you’ll breach in and stay silent, with no civilian casualties. There’s a tight stairwell up the floors, it’ll be cramped, with two to three rooms on each floor, stick together and check your corners!” Finn concluded.

We loaded onto 2 Blackhawks, 1 for each team. To stay safe, we would land in a Japanese fort, take a boat, and drive our way to the apartment.

*Tyler Williams*

23:57

*October 4, 2030*

Harbin, China,

## Dengjiacun apartment complex

---

A storm had rolled in, making visibility lower and sound less potent. The overcast from Germany had brewed into a supercell over China. Thunder rumbled the ground for miles. Lightning flashed in the distance. The rain against the SUV made the dark, darker, and the quiet, quieter.

“There,” Billcap pointed, “Shady guy leaving the building,”. I squinted through the rain-streaked windshield. We were sitting in the front seats of a dark SUV with Bravo in the backseats. Alpha had the same setup, but on the opposite side of the parking lot.

“Think it’s our guy?” he held up a grainy surveillance photo. It was Wu, wearing a sleeveless hoodie, a hat under the hood, and

tattoos up his arm, "Hard to tell," I replied. The man stepped under the dim light above the doorway tugging at his hood under the downpour. He didn't look quite like Wu "I don't think so," I said. I tapped my finger on the dashboard, I'm sure that Wu is in there.

"When I get in there," Sergeant Leon Kenneth remarked from the back of the van, "Imma whoop this Wu guy's ass!"

"Can it, Kenneth." Lewis shot him down immediately.

"Get ready," Finn said over the mic. We finally got confirmation. "We're infilling in less than a minute." We hovered our hands over the door handles. I flexed my fingers, waiting as long as I could. Then, just as Finn exited his SUV, we followed. We were wearing all-black uniforms with SBNVGs, to ensure stealth and concealment in the dark.

"Let's move." Finn ordered. Everyone cautiously, and quietly, converged around the cars and to the entrance.

"Samuel, Kosorsky, Gillian, Lewis, round the alleys, patrol, and make sure no one leaves from anywhere." Finn ordered, "Billcap, Winston, Kalley, Kenneth, you're with me.

Stick to me like glue, we're not getting lost." He said opening the door, "Aren, Fennek, Sanhall, you stay here and watch this door. Good luck." Finn ended, aiming his rifle up the first flight of stairs.

Right behind him, I checked to the right of the stairs, seeing no one, "Clear," I whispered, moving to follow Finn. At the top of the first flight were two doors, spaced by a few inches, facing the stairs, it was like that for each floor continuing our ascension.

We got to floor 6 when a kid with headphones walked out of his room, freezing when his gaze caught the soldiers outside his room.

"Shh..." Finn whispered with his finger against his lips.

The kid froze staring at the foreign soldiers outside of his room, "Mama, waimian youren?" The kid said cautiously with the door half-opened, "Aiya, huilai!" The mother came out and pulled the kid inside, glancing up at Finn's tall stature. "Tamen zheli shi weile lou shang nage fengzi." The woman muttered, closing the door. "We're good," Finn called in a hushed tone, "They know what we're here for." He continued climbing the stairs.

“Alpha, you in position?” Finn asked as we arrived at the topmost floor, “Yes, sir. The fire escape is out here,” Lewis replied, “No one is leaving,”.

Outside the right top-floor room, a commotion could be heard inside.

A conversation—laughing.

From afar the sound was drowned out by the rain.

“Ni bu zhidao ma?” A voice called, “Uguan zenyang, wo qi pai!”, “O ni zhege xiao mao!” Another voice exclaimed, laughing, “Shang Wu zong shi shengli!” The first voice exclaimed, “That’s our guy,” Finn whispered, “He’s here. Billcap, Kenneth, Kal, get ready,” He whispered hoarsely.

Finn held up three fingers, then two, then one. all of us readied our rifles as Finn lunged to kick down the door.

“FREEZE! DONGJIE!” Finn shouted. 4 men froze, mid-laugh, around a small table with poker chips, half-eaten candies, crumpled bills, empty bottles, and playing cards set on the table. Each of the men held their hands half-up.

“Woah, shenme gui!” The voice at the far side of the round table exclaimed. “Game’s over,” Finn barked, “Do *not* move.”

“Yo, who are you?!” A man in a sleeveless hoodie and tattoos up his arm shouted with a very heavy accent.

“Shang Wu, you’re under arrest.” Finn ordered, “Na dao buqiang!” Wu shouted, pointing his finger to an open room. One of the men ran over. Finn lit the room in gunfire. The runner got to safety in time to come back out with rifles, “Paobu!” The armed one shouted, “Fall back!” Finn shouted as we hid to the side of the door.

The sound of glass shattering could be heard, “He’s breaking for the fire escape!” Lewis shouted over the mic. Armed Chinese men filed out of the room on the left, “Get back!” Finn shouted, all of us firing when we could, dropping them, “I’M HIT!” Kenneth shouted, stumbling down the stairs to the 14th floor, all of us slowly stepped down the stairs to get a bit of cover.

***KABOOMM!!!***

An explosion ripped apart the top floor, launching us back. I tumbled down the steps before catching myself. "Damnit!" I cursed, slamming my helmet on the ground. I looked up and around, the armed Chinese on the 15th floor were caught in the blast.

"This is Alpha-Bravo Actual, requesting immediate evac!" Finn shouted over the radio, "Shang Wu, He got away, sir!" Lewis yelled over the mic. The dimly lit apartment complex was now inflamed with bright orange,

"This is Romeo Command, is Shang Wu with you?" A voice asked, "No," Finn replied, "He got away... And any evidence of him being here is gone too." He huffed standing up in the ruins of the apartment.

"HOW DID HE GET AWAY!!" Finn screamed. Coughing could be heard behind the rubble of the apartment, "Check him!" Finn ordered, I quickly moved to find who it was, "bu, bu, bu, baituo," The third man at the table pleaded, blood ran from his mouth and forehead as I lifted him from the rubble. "Wo yu zhe jian shi wuguan!". "Oh, shut it!" I scolded, slamming him against a charred wall.

*Tyler Williams*

“Shenme dou bu zhidao!” The man continued,  
“No, no, English.” He sobbed in broken English.

I cocked my fist back, "Bullsh-" Finn put his hand on my shoulder, "You're not gonna get anything from him." He sighed. "Just take him, we'll get a linguist." He turned around. I loosened my grip. "Romeo, this is Alpha-Bravo, make that a plus one." Finn pinched the bridge of his nose, "Let's get out of here." Fire trucks pulled up to extinguish the flames. Residents of the apartment came out of their rooms to see what happened.

Chapter 8:

## Dockyard

October 7, 2030

8:53

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The socket clicked as Phil reattached my arm. "I don't know how you do it, but danger seems to follow you everywhere." Phil exclaimed, "Good as new! The Durny-Two is compatible with the Type-Three prosthetic, so no surgery for you.", "Thanks, Phil," I replied.

"Something bothering you?" He folded his arms and sighed, "It's Lucas, isn't it?"

I exhaled deeply, "His funeral is today,"

"Impossible," He replied confidently.

"They didn't recover his body; I would know."

Phil claimed, "You don't need a body for a funeral; it happens all the time." I replied.

"Let's be reasonable; you're still grieving." Phil said, "Look," I towered a head

over him, "I'm going to find the man who gave that tip, that's it!". Phil looked disappointed.

"Just remember," Phil warned, looking up at me, "Catching this guy might not help your anger, but may fuel it.". I stormed out of the room.

The memory of Germany embedded in my vision. The long hall stretched on as I continued. I wish I could have done something, anything. My phone's ring broke the fog.

Kate

The contact read. "*Hey, Jacob,*" Kate greeted me with a question. "Hey," I replied, "I've been meaning to talk to you.", "*Have you heard from Lucas?*" She asked. I replied, "I'll tell you about it when I get to you.".

*Knock Knock Knock...*

Kate quickly opened the door. Noticing me, "So what's so important that you had to talk to me about in person?" Her voice carried a nervous edge. I walked in. "Do you want a drink first?" I asked. She shook her head. "What's going on? Is this about Lucas?".

We sat down on the couch. I looked everywhere but her eyes. "Look," I exhaled deeply, "Lucas...". Concern spread across her face. "There was nothing I could do." I looked down. She slowly shook her head in doubt, "No... No, you're kidding, right?" She forced a chuckle but never smiled.

"The Stache house was a setup; the tip was a lie." Her breathe hitched.

I slowly stood up and walked to the frame between the living room and kitchen. Kate buried her head in her hands. Her sobs slipped from her hands. The anger boiled, my face burned, and my fists clenched. "And I..." My voice cracked, and a sob tore from throat. "I couldn't do ANYTHING!" I slammed my fist into the drywall, bruising bottom of my fist.

I rasped, "There was nothing I could do..."

I inhaled sharply and sat next to Kate, who trembled. "But, I promise..." I wrapped my arms around her, "I'll make him pay..."

*Tyler Williams*

It feels like ever since I lost my arm, the sky has remained perpetually cloudy – Clouds have trailed me wherever I go.

Lucas's 'funeral,' was held in Owasso, Oklahoma, off of highway 20. I stood afar beside a tree, I didn't plan to have a eulogy so I never made one. The guilt of being there would've been too much, Lucas had time to react, right?

The memory flooded back to me like a tsunami.

*"Jacob..." Lucas said quietly, "The boats... They're rigged..."*

The memory overcame any visual I had; It felt like a trance. Like I was back at that boathouse in Germany.

I shook my head to wipe the memory from my vision. My phone rang just as I leaned off of the tree to leave.

"Hello?" I asked into the phone, "Yes, sir, I'll be right there." I replied to the man behind it.

Radcliffe leaned into his chair, "Winston. Meet Elijah,". A tall, skinny guy with black hair, dark brown eyes, clear-framed glasses, and headphones around his neck, nodded behind a laptop, "Hey," Elijah replied, his voice was way too deep for the nerdy look.

I looked him up and down again, "Your voice sounds like a subwoofer.", "Yeah, that's why they call me Kick." He smirked. I don't think anyone calls him that.

"He's a hacker," Radcliffe said, "He found the first location of Wu, and now he's found the second location of him. Thanks to our Chinese friend, Jong Ming, who was left in the rubble.", "Really?" I replied, "Yes," Radcliffe bounced back, leaning into a chair.

"We had a linguist interrogate him," Elijah explained, "He didn't know much, but he spoke about a hangout at a dock in North Korea; Some place that hosts parties every weekend. It's a place for lonely people to meet, have fun, party, et cetera. Apparently, our Shang Wu character has a type of... Joint ownership, and can be found partying there every weekend."

"Am I going alone?" I asked, "pfft." Radcliffe scoffed, "You're with Billcap." He said, "Billcap!?" I exclaimed,

"Anyone and I'm stuck with the rookie Bullcrap!?"

Radcliffe gave me a nasty look. "He's not a rookie—not anymore," Radcliffe defended, "He's a Corporal now."

"Oh, yeah because that makes it *that* much better." I blocked. Elijah pulled his headphones over his head.

"This assignment will be good for him," Radcliffe said.

"So this is training now?"

"It's always training, Winston."

"Come on, what about Soup?" I complained,

"What *about* Soup? He's stationed in Poland at the moment.",

"Finn?" I tried.

"Billcap is the only available candidate, trust me. There's more to him than meets the eye. End of discussion. You leave on the 11th and

*Tyler Williams*

will search for Wu on the 12th. Now leave my office." Radcliffe barked.

It had only been a few days and I was already back over the coast, this time with one of the most annoying soldiers on the planet.

“Why does everyone call you Jacob? Isn’t your name Jacup?” Billcap asked through the headset, pronouncing the Y sound for the J. I sighed, “It’s my mothers maiden name.”. We sat opposing each other as the helicopter rocked lightly.

“Then why does everyone call you Jacob?”,

“It’s simpler, and American,”,

“So you’re not American?”,

I looked at him, “Why do you ask so many questions?”,

“Why don’t you answer?” Billcap smirked.

“Look, we’re just here for Wu, That’s it. When we find him, we’ll get what we want to know and leave.”.

“It’s not like *you’re* my first choice either,” He said quietly. I didn’t reply.

“Here you go!” Our pilot called, “You’ll have to wade through the trees but you’ll make it,” The pilot called as he descended.

About a mile of stormed swamp blocked our path. Muddy water filled every crevice of the path. Weeds stuck out from the water, some lily pads drowned in the rain. The dock had been dead for years, almost everything was left behind: Shipping containers, cranes, and half-sunken ships.

“It’s freezing!” Billcap already started complaining, “Well, of course, it’s October, storming, and shin-high flooding.” I replied.

“I wish I was back with my family in Staten Island,” Billcap remarked,

“Well, maybe when you serve your four years, you can go back,” I replied,

“That’s not a bad idea,” Billcap added.

Billcap’s starting to remind me of Yinstz.

About half an hour passed and our progress was slow, “How much longer?” Billcap complained, “I can’t feel my feet!”.

This guy gives me a headache, “You’ll get used to it, I told you to get the water boots.” I replied, “Just a little bit longer.”

“Is that it!?” Billcap pointed towards a light through the trees, “Yeah!” I said, “Come on!” I said picking up my pace. It was almost midnight. This place is pretty popular, but the only way to get in was by invitation. The tree line broke open into a wide shipping yard, quite expansive.

## BANG, BANG, BANG

I knocked on a container wall labeled *entrance* via spray paint.

A small piece of metal slid open, like a peephole. The man behind it looked at us and slammed the peephole shut, clanking could be heard before the container wall opened widely. I pulled out the photo of Shang Wu, “You seen this guy?” I asked the doorman, he shook his head. The dockyard was alive with hundreds of people packed here, makeshift lounges and bars made from shipping containers and more. Smoke billowed from burn barrels littered

around the yard, people placed racks over them to cook food.

It was like Carter Brown's New Cardboard City, but with shipping containers.

"Stick with me, I don't want you getting lost." I told Billcap, bumping through the crowd, "Have you seen this man?!" I asked people as I walked by, I only got confused looks and head shakes.

This place seemed like a haven—many different people from many countries came here.

"Don't get distracted," I told Billcap, turning around to see no one behind me, "Hey, there." A deceptively dressed woman, holding a tray of drinks beside me, greeted, "Not interested," I replied quickly. The burn barrels provided some warmth in the cold, drizzling rain. "Jacup!!" I heard that annoying voice yell, "That's him!" A man bumped past me in a hurry, Billcap giving chase. "What are you doing!?" Billcap asked as he passed, waving his arms. I followed Billcap as best I could while bumping through the crowd.

The containers tunneled into an empty, winding corridor riddled with barrels and wooden palettes, "STOP!" I shouted, unholstering my

pistol. He knocked over barrels, blocking my path with palettes, I couldn't get an open shot to disable him. I vaulted over the fallen palettes and managed to keep up with Wu. He took a sharp right and knocked a barrel over before me. I hurdled the barrel but kept losing the progress I make.

"Billcap! Go! I'll cut him off!" I yelled to Billcap, diverting my attention to my left arm.

My lungs burned and my legs felt like concrete. I fumbled my fingers on the epinephrine injection.

After accepting, the arm opened and presented one of two injectors inside. I opened the cap and jammed it into my shoulder. My vision sharpened and my pulse quickened.

I used a barrel to jump up on top of a container unit, scanning for Billcap. I couldn't see them so I followed the corridor. My boots slammed against the hollow containers. The adrenaline made me feel faster and more energized, like I was invincible.

I quickly found Billcap and noticed Wu. Even with some of my gear on, I was able to catch up to him. "WU STOP!" Billcap yelled, "THE DOCK ENDS THERE!" He pleaded, exhausted.

Finally moving adjacent to him on the container I left, tackling him and rolling us to the edge of the dock.

Wu was disoriented, but I wasn't. As Wu sprawled on the ground, I got up and walked up to him. He groaned from the container-high drop attack.

Grabbing him by the collar of his shirt with my left arm, I leaned him over the side of the dock, which was well over a 20-foot drop. "OKAY, OKAY!" He screamed, grabbing my arm and putting his feet on the very edge of the dock. "I DON'T HAVE YOUR MONEY, BUT I'LL GET IT! I PROMISE!" He cried.

He was wearing a dark blue tuxedo with a flower on the left pec – typical.

"Money?" I asked,

"You guys aren't Mikey's men!?" He asked,

"No," I replied, "We're worse. More accurately, me." I clenched his collar tighter, "You know..." I taunted, picking a piece of fuzz from his shoulder with my right hand, "It'd suck if this suit were ruined, especially from salt water." I taunted, jerking him back, "OKAY, OKAY!!" He squirmed, clawing at my wrist, "I'll TELL YOU ANYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW! ANYTHING"

He cried. He glanced between me and the dark waters below.

“The stachehouse tip!” I barked, jerking him back.

“No...” His eyes widened, “That’s you!?” He squirmed.

“You killed my best friend. Consider the fact that you’re still alive a gift!”.

“I DID WHAT I HAD TO, BELIEVE ME!” He shouted.

“Who gave you the tip.” I demanded. He didn’t reply, “Who... Gave you... The TIP!” I leaned him back further.

He squeezed his eyes shut, “I can’t tell you. He’d kill me!” He dug his nails into my left sleeve.

“What makes you think I won’t,” I said coldly.

“H-H-H-He’s military!” He stuttered, “A general!”.

“I’m losing my patience,” I persisted.

“He threatened me, he said he’d kill me!” He cried.

“Once again...” I pinched the bridge of my nose, “Looks like you’ll join the fish.”

“IVUSHKIN!!” He screamed. I pulled him back up a bit, “Ivushkin Maklev!”. “And where is he,” I barked.

“In the mountains; some bunker. I don’t know the name!” He cried. I leaned him back, “I don’t know, I genuinely don’t know!”

“Where!” I jerked him back.

“IT’S LIKE THE HIGHEST PEAK OR SOMETHING THAT’S ALL!! PLEASE DON’T DROP ME!” Tears mixed with the drizzling rain on his face. I thought for a moment, “In Germany...” I said,

“I’m sorry, okay! I didn’t mean for anyone to get hurt!” He held my arm with a death grip.

“You supplied them with the explosives?” I asked,

“Yes... In return for arms, we would get weaponry and support in return. I had to, I’m running a business!” He pleaded, “Please... Don’t kill me!” He sobbed. Then, he noticed my left hand.

“Wait... You’re him! You’re that super soldier!”, “Oh... Shut. Up!” I groaned tossing him back onto the dock, “You’re not worth it,” I snarled, waving him to leave, “That was brutal.” Billcap huffed, leaning on his knees. I forgot he had been there and watched the whole thing. “Whatever,” I replied, “We’ve got a mountain to hike. He said the highest peak, which is Mount Narodnaya, in the Ural Mountains.” I said walking off, signaling him to follow.

*Tyler Williams*

Chapter 9:

## Заключенный...

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“Get the sledgehammer,” I ordered in a hushed tone. “Don’t worry,” Acki replied, “I got this, just be careful when you run... And be fast.”

Acki lifted the hammer and wound up the strike, hoping that it would snap the chain.

*CLANG*

The chain jumped and sparks flew.

*CLANG*

The same thing. This time, Acki placed a spike into the bent chainlinks.

*CLANG*

Acki raised the sledgehammer higher aiming for the weakened chainlink. I flinched as the hammer came down hard.

*CLANK!!*

“There,” He pointed, “Wait for the guard to walk behind the building, then go.” Acki pushed me. I was shaking, but had no time to think, “Catch you on the flip side!” I jogged to warm up for a sprint.

The guard at the far right corner steadily patrolled and was eventually concealed by the building, cueing me to start sprinting.

It was a frigid, flat wasteland, constantly snowing it seemed. It was barely below freezing, but I had become accustomed to colder climates; I grew up in Chicago and had subjected myself to colder temperatures almost all my life.

As the sun set, the snowfall thickened, and the air grew colder and colder. The prison was no longer in view, so I was safe. At least I thought I was.

The only way to stay conscious was to keep running and not stop.

The temperature started to get to me and even walking felt like a full-body exertion.

My chest was freezing and I couldn't see where I was going, relying on my balaclava to keep my face warm.

The only part of my body I could feel were my thighs.

I felt like I wasn't making any progress, the tracks behind me covered within seconds, and the purple sky and heavy snowfall kept visibility at the very minimum. My eyes began to feel heavy, like a bowling ball tied to my eyelids. I stopped jogging involuntarily in the blistering cold. I eventually succumbed to the cold and fell to my knees, hitting something hard.

I moved the snow only to find another prisoner—frozen.

I tried to scream but instead, I rasped. My throat was dry, adrenaline told me to run.

No way was I going to end up like that.

Everything burned, like needles until, eventually, I found myself at a stop, dropping hard into the snow and slipping out of consciousness.

I slowly woke up in a dark and drabby room made of concrete. I was lying on a bed with a nasal tube feeding me warm air. The room had the heavy stench of rusted metal. My head spun and my stomach churned.

“On prosnulsya.” A man holding a rifle to my left said steadily to an older man in a beret. It was Isiah. “Khorosho.” He turned to me and walked forward, “Nikto ne ubegayet... Kak daleko ty zashel?”. “What...?” I rasped. “Ah, I forget!” he replied, forcing a smile, “You are, uh, one of the American!” He exclaimed in an accent.

“How did you find me?” I asked, clearing my throat and sitting up.

He grinned, “By what you call...” He searched for the word, “Teplovizor?” He asked, looking at the soldier on his left and then back at me, “Thermal, I believe is what you call it; long-range thermal. You were sneaky!” He

complimented, pointing his finger, "But no one escapes this easily.",

"This isn't Russia is it?" I asked,

"Why of course not!" He laughed, "Why would we need a railroad in Russia?! We have roads everywhere! Etot idiot!" He laughed, pulling out a knife and shoving it into the guard on his left, his grin quickly turning into a scowl, "Kak ty mog eto dopustit'?" He whispered into the guard's ear before the guard dropped to the floor.

"Now, obviously there are consequences to your actions." He said looking at me, "Nakazat'!" He shouted, clapping his hands together.

Guards rushed in immediately after and dragged me out of the bed, putting a hood over my head, "Wait! What are you doing!?" I shouted, "What's happening!?" I screamed.

"You will pay for what you've done, this will teach you a lesson." He paused for a brief moment, "Slomayte yego..." .

I was dragged and sat on a chair when the hood was taken off of my head. In front of me stood A tall and slender man with short black hair and a crooked smile. The room was just like the last but with a medical tray next to him. On the medical try sat stakes, needles, wrenches, and... “How should we do this American?” He asked, picking up a bloody pair of pliers.

Chapter 10:

## End of the Noose

12:20

*December 25, 2030*

Mount Narodnaya

---

“Hey,” a soldier to my right inquired. I sat on the left side of a Blackhawk.

“Does your arm *really* make you, like, a super-soldier?”, “No,” I replied, “It’s more of a burden.”

6 armed Blackhawks were heading towards Mount Narodnaya at an altitude of around 100-200 feet to ghost from SAM radar.

“Hold on!” Mak shouted, “We’ll be ascending to land at the bunker! On the red light you get out of this bird ASAP!”.

Our plan was simple: Reach the bunker entrance and use the chopper’s weapons to take out any RPG or Anti-Aircraft in our way. Mak manned the m60, ready to suppress fire. A soldier farthest to the left got up and opened the side door, another soldier on the other side did the same.

“Singer, lower your altitude or you’ll be targeted by SAM” Our pilot radioed to another, “Singer, lower your-”.

The helicopter closest to us, which was about 30 feet above the safe altitude, had been targeted and burst into flames. “We’re comin’ up to land!” Mak shouted, I gripped my rifle tighter. The helicopter quickly came to a stop as Mak started firing the m60 mount. The other Blackhawks had done the same, firing missiles.

The violent buzz of the m60 shredded everything in its path. A moment passed and we were cleared to land. As the ground approached, we filed out one by one. When all of us had left, our helicopter left and the next one came.

On the ledge, where the bunker door was located, was what looked like a driveway that could be seen running down the side of the mountain that was blocked by a mechanical gate.

The bunker was secured via a biometric scanner or inside entry. Any guard granted access to the bunker had their ID scanned into the system.

The bunker barely exposed itself to the outside of the mountain.

I grabbed a dead guard and put his hand on the scanner,

*Awaiting second authorization*

The screen read. On the other side of the entrance was another scanner, meaning that two guards were required. Mak delivered the second hand to the scanner.

*Awaiting confirmation*

“That’s not good,” I said aloud. A very brief moment passed and a red light coned around the entrance as the bunker door slowly began to open.

Inside were hundreds of guards who were waiting for us, "GET BACK!" Mak shouted as everyone moved from the opening of the door. A few unlucky guys were immediately shredded by gunfire as the entrance widened. "GRENADE!" A soldier yelled, tossing something inside.

*BOOM!*

The grenade exploded as another soldier followed up with tear gas. A crowd of coughing and wheezing could be heard right after the pop of the gas. All of us slowly filed in, clearing the room as the gas settled. We were outnumbered about 10 to 1 but we had already cleared an entire room. The first bunker room looked like an armory, with weapons on racks and a few firing ranges.

A door blocked access to the next room, luckily, a few of our soldiers had breaching charges, "Clear!" The soldiers called as they set the charges. It was a fortified door, made completely out of metal, the hinges for it didn't seem to exist.

"Breaching!" One of the sliders yelled as the door blew open. Beyond the door were stairs, which led to a guard camped with an mg. A few

soldiers went in and were torn apart. It was a slaughter as a more soldiers mustered the strength to run up there, using fallen comrades as cover. None of them made it.

“Do we have any more grenades?!” A soldier asked, I still had mine, “I do!” I answered tossing it across the doorway to the soldier who asked for it. I grabbed my second (and last) grenade and tossed it up the stairs in unison with the other soldier.

An explosion resounded, knocking the mg that was mounted down the stairs.

“You got a name?” I asked the soldier, “Brooklyn.” He replied, “Isn’t that a girl’s name?” I chuckled, “I dunno how I got it. One day, they just started callin’ me that.”

Heading up the stairs, we saw the nest the guard had made. Sandbags set up in a crescent with an MG I’ve never seen before that was mounted on the wall. It was a good idea, but it was easily crippled.

The stairs had killed so many of us, that only about 20 out of us remained.

The next room was empty and very quiet. This room was also very spacious, but on the left side was what looked like a bar, and on the right side were a few meeting rooms.

A few columns supported the walls and middle of the bunker.

We cautiously ventured halfway through the room when guards jumped out of the rooms on the sides, gunning a few of us down, as we took cover.

“How many are there!?” A soldier shouted, “About twenty or so!” Mak answered, “I’m out!” I yelled, tossing my empty mag and pulling out my pistol, “Who’s got extra five-five-six!?” I asked, “I’m hit!” Mak cried.

I leaned around the column I was hiding behind, shot down the last two guards, and rushed to assess Mak.

Mak muttered a curse, “A few lucky shots and... The plates’ll break, I guess.” Mak huffed, “Come on, we can’t do this without you.” Billcap pleaded. I stood off to the left side of Mak, Billcap was on the right side and knelt with Mak. Mak held his stomach, where he had been shot. “I’ll call for medical... And reinforcement... you guys... Check the next room...” Mak rasped as he coughed and spat blood, “You’re wasting time...” He insisted. Billcap got up and left his m18 with him, as he turned around his attention was focused on a guard, who was leaning against a column,

holding a pistol. I drew my pistol as fast as I could and fired the last 3 rounds I had, 2 in his chest and another in the head, the guard dropped simultaneously with Billcap.

"Billcap!" I said kneeling next to him, blood slowly poured from his shoulder, "I figured you'd just walk off..." He said quietly, "I'll be fine," He chuckled, leaning forward, "Just..." He winced in pain, "Gimme a minute ".

A weird sensation came over me, Mak had been quiet for some time; he never did call for any backup. I crawled over to Mak's dead body, he was shot way more than once.

"Victor-2 this is Alpha 3-6 Actual, respond?" I said over the radio, static came back, "Victor-2 this is Alpha 3-6 Actual, I need backup plus one wounded. We're the only ones left, we need reinforcement, over." I repeated, but more static came back.

I was afraid of how many more guards would be in the last room, but there was only one way to find out.

"Billcap?" I asked. He was shot in the right shoulder, "Come on." I said. Billcap sat against the wall, "I can't... I'll call in reinforcements." He couldn't move his right arm and his pistol was out of ammo, "Toss me your knife," I had lost mine.

So now, it's just me.

Again...

I stepped up to the last doorway of the bunker that barely exposed itself to the outside. Lifting my rifle through the doorway, I saw no one; it was empty. The 'bunker' was built like a fortress, with walls that covered where Tanks and Humvees would sit. It was empty now, but this bunker acted like a garage with the ground vehicle exit/entrance to the left of the doorway, and a helipad to the right. I stepped through the doorway, something caught the corner of my eye. My rifle stock slammed against my skull. Everything spun for a brief moment, and when everything focused, a general charged me with a knife in his hand. I got up to retaliate, but we both scrambled to the floor. The general rolled us over, using the leverage of his weight to drive the knife. I quickly raised my arms to protect myself, but desperation gripped me.

I found myself quickly losing this fight and, In my last hope of not dying, I swung a right hook, using my left arm to grab the general and connect the hook, causing him to reel and drop the knife less than an inch from my head.

I grabbed the knife and threw it as quickly as possible at the general, poorly. The handle struck his rib, buying me enough time to scramble for my rifle.

**BANG**

**BANG**

The general had ripped his revolver from his holster and fired toward me.

I grabbed my rifle and swung it around to the general. Squeezing the trigger, a distinct sound rang.

*Click...*

The general grinned and aimed his revolver again, training his sight. I planted my boot against the ground and darted for the wall that protruded from the exterior. I braced myself for the molten pieces of lead to hit me, but all that came was the slam of the hammer hitting an empty cylinder.

Our eyes locked.

I rushed him, tackling him to the ground. Right hook after left and I felt the general's boot on my chest, throwing me forward. The general hastily scrambled for his knife. My head still spun as I saw his silhouette march toward me. I spun around to stand, but he grabbed me and rammed the knife into my thigh. I yelled in pain, my spine sent jolts of pain through my whole body.

I leaned forward and kicked him, causing him to reel and drop the knife.

I grabbed the knife and hurled it toward him.

This time, it connected perfectly with the center of his torso. He gasped and hovered his hands around the knife before ripping it out. He pulled his revolver from his holster, shaking, mumbling in Russian.

“Proklyatyte svin'i... Vy suyote nos ne v svoyo delo...” He reloaded his revolver, trying to steady his breathing. “Kak budto tebe bol'she nechem zanyat'sya...!”

I finally looked up, and I noticed his face growing unusually pale.

He held up a light-gray fob, about the size of a flint lighter, with a single red button on top.

“I’ve had enough...” He said in a heavy accent, “I’ll make you pay...” He rasped, “I’ll teach you... This whole... Act, you Americans put on...” He stumbled, struggling to stay up, “It’s over...” .

He pressed the button, “What did you do!? What did that just do?!” I shouted leaning up, wincing at my leg. He steadied his revolver, and staggered back.

He lifted his revolver and aimed it at me. I knew this was the end and I could feel my head growing lighter and lighter. My vision faded as I finally heard the hammer pull back and a deafening bang reverberate through the mountains.

*Tyler Williams*

## Afterthoughts

This is Tyler speaking. I've spent a good bit of time writing this novel. This is the first time I've written a novel, and with that, I didn't know exactly what to do. I've hyped this story for so long only to postpone it for later and later. Eventually, I thought that writing wasn't meant for me, so I spent the next couple of years figuring out what I wanted to do. Then, I had a burst of insight, and practically pulled apart and restitched everything that you just read.

Now, I can go on and ramble about what this book *would've* been like if I had followed the path it was initially going, but then you would probably have never found this.

Everyone at the beginning of this book both directly and indirectly helped me build this. From English teachers to football coaches. My friends thought it was weird at first until I actually finished this, then they looked into what this story really is.

Even now, after about 5 or 6 years of work, I'm still clueless as to what I'm supposed to put after the whole story.

So, I'll put some cool facts after my thoughts - This book is supposed to be a somewhat relatable, sci-fi, military action narrative, and I think I explained it in the way I wanted to, but some translations aren't spot on, even then, I have done extensive editing to ensure they're as accurate as possible.

Now, Jacup's evolution from a relatively normal, expendable enlist to a deeply involved, physically augmented, vengeance-driven soldier was something I've had in mind for a while. The theme of this story can be difficult, but it's really about revenge and the lengths we would go through when we're emotionally involved.

I don't have *one* central theme, that is up for interpretation. But it comes around the emotional turmoil of war and some horrors of it, too.

The way I've structured this story may be a bit confusing, so I'll explain it enough for you to better understand.

So, we start with an introductory prologue, where Jacup is explaining the setting and how he got to this point. We then see what that point was, *literally* the *point* of a mountain.

As the story progresses, we see how Jacup loses his arm and the action that the government took. You'll probably be asking deeper questions that are pretty easy to answer, even on your own. A good mix of biology, psychology, and a hint of electronic intuition allowed me to concoct the A.R.P. (Advanced Robotic Prosthetic) and D.I.N.R.I., or Durny (Direct. Internal. Neural. Recognition. Implant), which may or may not have had some inspiration from Treyarch.

After the Durny, Jacup prepares to assault Spain, which is where we transition to Royce. I'm not going to explain the *whole* story, but again, I'll allow you to easily digest it. Royce is then taken to a Russian gulag in an 'undisclosed' location.

We can easily see the blend of Jacup's and Royce's perspectives of the same moment before they are separated for the rest of this story.

A question I asked myself is, “Did I build a friendship between Jacup and Royce?”. As I thought about it, I don’t think it would make any difference if they were friends, but they both certainly know of each other. Also, I’m not sure if you could just glean this yourself, but you can’t trust everything Jacup describes; it may not be entirely accurate. He’s the main character, not God.

Another question that kept squeezing me was, “What about those loose ends? Molokai, Davud, Wu, and Ivushkin?” Well... You’ll have to find out some other time.

I don’t want to break down this book too much, since that’s what something like SparkNotes or whatever is for, but I do want you to know my thoughts on this book as the author.

I hope you’ve enjoyed the story and separate plots I’ve concocted, and, who knows, maybe you’ll even find my next one...

-Tyler Williams, 2025

## Fun Facts:

- Subliminal was going to be Humanity, until I thought of a story where Humanity would be a better fit.
- Humanity is the name of my second book, which is about a teenager in a zombie apocalyptic Staten Island. It may or may not be connected to Jacob's narrative in a way.
- Jacob Winstons original name was something like Kyle Balancky.
- Jacob and Lucas's camaraderie is based on my friendships with inspiration from Travis and Jerry's in 23 Blast.
- The nuclear weapon in the prologue was going to be domestic and take place in Nevada, in a training ground reminiscent of Call of Duty.
- Mak was originally going to die in the prologue, and replaced by a woman, Captain Jane Oracle.
- Kate's original name was Kayla.

- I never changed chapter 10.
- The Durny **was** going to induce hallucinations using AI to give Jacob a type of Heads Up Display (HUD).
- The Durny is heavily inspired by Call of Duty: Black Ops III's DNI.
- That little tablet from the Easter training (Heartbeat sensor) is also from Call of Duty, specifically Modern Warfare 2019.
- Before Kyle was Jacob, the story was going to take place in 2049.
- The prison description has some inspiration from the Escape From Furnace series by Alexander Gordon Smith.
- It may have been hard to follow, but Royce's execution of Matthew Elbeleszcak, that earned him the nickname 'Kunai', was actually based on Domino's finisher in Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (2019).

*Tyler Williams*

– Lastly, (THIS IS A SPOILER) The prison is located in Greenland in a world where some precious stones have been located under the ice, hence the reason for the mining job.

*Tyler Williams*

## Epilogue...

“Sir,” A soldier stepped into General Radcliffe’s office, “We’ve intercepted a...” He hesitated, he didn’t expect a pigeon-flown message to have been intercepted.

“... A pigeon-flown message... Over Sweden. It’s from a prison guard—three of your men are there.”,

“Is this true?” Radcliffe asked, leaning forward,

“Yes, sir, here’s the paper. It’s in Russian, but we’re working to translate it.” The soldier slid the paper on the table.

## Tyler Williams

20 ноября 2030 г.

*Дорогая матушка Елена,*

*Молюсь, чтобы это письмо застало вас в добром здравии.*

*Жизнь в тюрьме... другая. Но заключённые развлекают.*

*Зарплата, которую я получаю как охранник, весьма щедрая.*

*Пару месяцев назад мы приняли двух американцев. Через пару недель мы нашли ещё одного мужчину – на берегу в Германии, в критическом состоянии.*

*Двое из них были обнаружены в Испании, в одном из трагических происшествий.*

*Третий... Он не должен был выжить. Когда он приходит в себя, он бормочет имя. Имя, которое он повторяет – не американское.*

*В любом случае, я ещё напишу вам как-нибудь. Но нам необходимо сохранить моё место работы в тайне.*

*С глубокой любовью,*

*Ваш сын – Келси*

*Tyler Williams*