

# New Fiction from Steve Kiernan: "War Ensemble"

Holding Dick Cheney's shotgun is not exactly how I thought I'd be spending my time when I joined the Marines. It was summer of '06 and the meatgrinder of Iraq was going full-tilt. President Bush had gathered all his advisors and generals and a host of other ne'er-do-wells at Camp David to come up with a strategy to unfuck the war. You've probably heard of it. The Surge. I'm sure whatever white paper commando coined the term was very proud of themselves. Anyway yadda yadda blah blah you get the picture. I was stationed there at the time as a security guard. Our biggest threat were angry Code Pink moms.

The morning of the big arrival I was called down to First Sergeant's office and told my orders to an infantry battalion had come in and I'd probably be in Iraq within a few months. Now, normally this was the best news a Camp David Marine could get, I'd finally get out of this chickenshit assignment and get to do what Marines are meant for, what all my friends from bootcamp had been doing for the past two years. I was twenty and dumb and had naively requested these orders a few months prior, had eagerly awaited to hear back as I went through the same groundhog day routine of six hours on duty and twelve hours off, over and over, staring at nothing but trees and fucking duty rosters. My gung-ho attitude changed however, when I received news of Cody, my bunk mate from boot camp. He had been killed just a few days earlier when his Humvee got ripped apart by a massive IED somewhere outside Haditha. He was the first person I really knew to get wasted and I remember feeling suddenly ashamed of my excitement and eagerness and the orders in my hand grew heavy with consequence and complicity. Processing this was too much for my twenty-year-old brain to handle, so I did what any Marine faced with a complex emotional dilemma would do; I tried to

ignore them.

That's the headspace I was in when all this went down.

Now let me get to the big visit.

VIPs wouldn't arrive for a few hours, but Secret Service advance teams were already setting up shop around the facility and we had begun standing up all the extra guards a presidential visit requires. Hoping to keep myself distracted I hid in the React Room with a squad of Marines fully kitted out in body armor, M4 rifles, ammunition, smoke grenades, night-vision goggles, hell, even an M240G medium machine gun. We were watching *The Notebook*.

Sgt Zak walked in and flipped on the lights, producing a round of boos and shouts as we shielded our eyes in the windowless enclave.

"Be quiet, you frickin' snakes." He was standing in front of the TV and holding a clipboard and though he was only 5'6, he knew how to take up a lot of space.

"Oh come on, sarnt!" Dave, who told dubious yet colorful stories of his time as a pool-boy in Daytona, was visibly upset. "Noah and Allie were just about to rekindle their love after he rebuilt the old house!"

"Love can wait."

More boos. Someone threw their hat. Sgt Zak ignored them.

"Okay, morning announcements. Trailblazer will be arriving later this afternoon at 1520, soon followed by the press corps. Other cabinet members will be arriving periodically from 1600 to 2000, so be prepared for several LZ Ops."

Trailblazer, of course, being the president's Secret Service codename. All the Bush family and most of the higher-up cabinet officials had codenames—usually some dumb reference to

the person's character or interests. In Bush's case, he loved mountain biking.

"Also, Angler," that's Cheney, "will be arriving at 1000 and I've been told wants to squeeze in some time at the skeet range. I'll need one of you to go out with him as Range Safety Officer."

A bit of context: maybe you remember but Cheney had just recently shot a friend in the face with a shotgun while out quail hunting. He said it was an accident.

The banter died down as all of us in the room suddenly found something very interesting to inspect on our uniforms and gear. I started picking at my name tape, which was coming unstitched on one side. Travis got up and walked for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?" Sgt Zak said.

"Some rich white guys want to go out and shoot guns and you expect the one black dude to go out there with 'em?"

"Ah dang, good point."

Travis opened the door and left the room.

"Come on, you guys are usually fighting over the chance to get some close-up time with VIPs."

"You know he just shot a dude in the face, right?" I said.

There was a round of agreement, but Sgt Zak just crossed his arms.

I thought I might slink out of the room like Travis, seeing that I wasn't even on the react team and in no mood to entertain the powers-that-be, but I got the sense that was a one-time deal. My chances were probably better staying grouped up with everyone else, a united front.

“He ain’t even on react, send him.” Dave said, pointing at me.

Despite his amusing eccentricities, Dave is foremost an asshole.

“Gosh dangit. Dave, give me a mag.” Sgt Zak didn’t wait and instead ripped open a velcro pouch and took one of Dave’s loaded pistol magazines. He then picked up the hat that was thrown earlier and began unloading the bullets into it.

“Ah what the fuck, sarnt?” Dave protested.

Sgt Zak then pulled out a sharpie from his pocket and drew a black X on one bullet.

“Each of you take a bullet without peeking, whoever gets the X gets to RSO for Angler.”

He came around with the hat and we each did as we were told.

You can guess where this is going.

“You got the X!” Dave laughed, again pointing at me.

The rest of them were laughing too. There’s nothing more amusing to Marines than seeing one of their own suffer.

“Yo, make sure you wear your glow-belt out there.”

“Nah, wear like five fuckin glow-belts.”

“Yeah, sling ‘em around your chest like Rambo.”

“Nice knowin ya, dude.”

“Rest in pieces, bro.”

Obviously, this did not improve my mood. The idea of shooting anything felt strangely perverse given the context of what Bush and the cabinet were there to do. One would think the moment demanded a sober retrospection of all that had led to the clusterfuck they had gotten us into. I remembered when

Cody and I got smoked by our D.I. after getting our wisdom teeth pulled because Cody had the gall to let blood drip onto the quarterdeck. He kept whispering "I'm sorry" over and over to me through gauze-filled cheeks while doing endless mountain-climbers. I wondered whether he had been buried yet, or if he was still at Dover getting pieced together for his parents. Maybe, had I taken Sgt Zak aside and confessed all of that to him he would have let me off. He probably would have. But I couldn't. Duty, pride, toxic masculinity, whatever you want to call it, held my mouth shut as I eventually got voluntold for the assignment.

So anyway, there I was, holding Cheney's shotgun and contemplating my life choices. This is something one does a lot in the military. It's actually the first thing one does in the military. But at this particular moment, I was tallying up every decision I made that brought me to signing those enlistment papers, which I had thought was the Right Thing, but now know to be the Wrong Thing, so if I could go back and change one of those decisions I would have ended up doing the Wrong Thing instead of the Right Thing, which would have actually been the Right Thing and not the Wrong Thing, but if I had done the Right Thing I know I would have felt bad for not doing the Wrong Thing and would then convince myself that the Wrong Thing was the Right Thing and I'd be right back to doing the Right Thing and I'd still end up standing at the skeet range holding Cheney's shotgun.

Angler was forty-five minutes late when he finally rolled up in a golf cart with the presidential seal glued onto the front it like some perverse, snub-nosed, boomer Popemobile. One of his aides was driving and brought the cart right up to the firing line, past the sign that read "No Vehicles Beyond This Point." One look at him told me this was headed for a worst-case scenario. I shit you not, despite this being a skeet range overlooking a perfectly manicured and level lawn, and with no reason to leave the covered and shady confines of the

firing line, Angler wore his full hunting regalia. Now this is summertime Maryland, the temp was hovering around 92 degrees and about a million percent humidity and here he was in rubber galoshes, Mossy Oak camouflage pants and shirt, and a hunter orange shooting vest with a dozen different pockets and pouches. And he was drinking a healthy three fingers of whiskey from a glass in his left hand.

"I'll take that," he said and grabbed the shotgun from my hands.

One step at a time, I told myself.

"Sir, I'll be your Range Safety Officer for today."

"Yes, yes, I'm quite familiar with range safety rules," he said without a hint of irony. "Let's get this show goin,' all the morons will be here soon and I wanna get some shooting in before they're all running around getting in the way of everything. Lord knows there's been god damn enough of that lately, ain't that right, Quincy?"

I assumed he was talking to the aide, who looked exactly like his name, but Angler neither looked back at him nor waited for a response.

"Where those shells at, son?"

I pointed to a nearby table where I had neatly stacked several boxes of shotgun shells. He opened a few and began filling his pockets until he was satisfied with the amount of ammo on his person.

"I say 'pull' and you release the clays."

I couldn't tell if he was asking or telling, but the long, thin smirk that never met his eyes told me it was the latter, and so I grabbed the remote.

"PULL!"

The violence of his voice shocked me for a moment before I pressed the button, sending two white clays sailing through the air in a long and slow parabola. He shot them both cleanly, so that they exploded into little white puffs.

"I told ya, Quincy, I told ya." He turned back to the table on his left and grabbed his drink. He had the shotgun cradled in his arm and it waved wildly with his movements, flagging everything behind him, including Quincy.

"Sir, please keep the firearm pointed down range," I said as sternly as I dared.

"Oh don't worry my boy, it ain't loaded anymore." He took a gulp of whiskey before adding, "We're the only ones out here."

Witnessing Angler in person was growing more difficult than I had anticipated. This man, I thought with a growing anger that continues burning to this day, would very likely be deciding my fate over the coming days, had already decided on so many others'. This man with his stupid fucking smirk, a ridiculous orange vest that bounced up and down in time with every nasally laugh, his halitosis, this man who kept referring to himself as Angler, would send us all to our fucking doom, killing and dying. And we let him do it.

We went like that for a while, him shouting "PULL!" and me pushing the button. He never missed a clay. And before you ask, yes, the discrepancy between his so-called "accident" and this impressive display of accuracy was not lost on me. Quincy even came up for a turn once Angler began to slow down, the alcohol finally reaching him. It was obvious Quincy had never held a weapon in his life, and Angler was taking a little too much pleasure in watching him fumble with the shells. When he did fire the gun he flinched hard and put a nice shotgun blast into the ground about ten feet in front of us, sending a dinnerplate sized divot into the air. Angler loved that. Needless to say, the lanky wasp didn't hit a single clay.

Cheney had finished his drink and had switched to smoking a stubby cigar, the smoke of which kept invading my nostrils and causing me to sneeze in fits. He thought that was funny too. I suffered through this until Cheney—apparently bored—held out the shotgun in my direction, and instead of waiting for me to grab it, just let go, sending me scrambling to reach it before it hit the ground. “Why don’t you go ahead and take a few shots” he told me. Now, like I said, I was in no mood for shooting and in-fact considered anything more than somber contemplation a violation of some ancient trust between soldiers and leaders, and more importantly, me and Cody. And plus, pretty soon there’d be dozens of staffers and other officials of varying power and stature wondering around like so many walking monsters and I wanted to get the hell outta the kill zone, maybe hide out with the react team and The Notebook again.

“Thank you sir, but as RSO my job is to ensure safety. Can’t do that and shoot at the same time.”

“Why not? You’ll have the gun.”

He had a good point, but again, I wasn’t in the mood for it, and plus, protocol dictates that we just supervise, try and stay in the background as much as possible. And then I got to thinking that if some officer happened to drive by and see me he’d think I was intentionally getting too friendly, and then he’d start wondering why some idiot corporal was out here shooting and rubbing elbows with Angler when it really should be him and that’s just not fair because rubbing elbows with the big-wigs was exactly the reason he used up two good favors to get this assignment and how was he supposed to wrangle that cushy job and promotion to major or colonel if he didn’t have some god damn connections and names to drop at parties with other officers who would be silently comparing him and his social status to all of his colleagues gunning for the same promotion and said cushy job and that if he didn’t get them then he would have to give up on this ill-fated career that

his father warned him against and end up going to law school or getting his MBA which was what his father wanted him to do all along but that he didn't think he was ready for because he just barely made it through Penn State as it was and he wasn't exactly what you'd call intellectually minded but neither is that god damn corporal and he sure as shit didn't need to build up a rolodex so just what the hell does he think he's doing?

I politely declined.

Cheney then stuck a box of shells in my hand.

"Shoot the god damn shotgun," he breathed up into my face.

I was only an inch taller than him but I made sure he noticed every bit of it. He didn't care. I couldn't give in, not to him. I was afraid of what might happen if I did, though I didn't know why. I'd love to get all poetic and revisionist and say it was my guilt over Cody's death driving me, but it was more than that. It felt celestial. All I know was there was something telling me to resist, refuse. Someone had to say, No.

I stretched myself taller and looked down into his pale colorless eyes and he laughed.

And all my feelings of resistance evaporated.

I took the shotgun and loaded the shells. "PULL," Cheney yelled for me, and I fired. The two white clays landed softly in the grass, untouched. I missed.

Humiliating, I know. To fast forward a bit: after I was mercifully done with Cheney, I ended up back in the react room. And because I apparently hadn't learned my lesson from the last time I needlessly hung out there, Sgt Zak again voluntold me for another assignment, this time as a road guard checking IDs of people trying to get to Aspen. Fun fact: The

cabins and buildings aboard Camp David are named after trees, which I rather liked, to be honest. Dogwood, Eucalyptus, Redwood, Sequoia, Willow, Birch, Walnut etc. Aspen was the presidential cabin where POTUS and his family lived while they were here. It was also where all the important meetings would be taking place. I doubt you want to hear about me standing at the end of Aspen's driveway for a few hours, so I'll fast forward some more.

After standing at the end of Aspen's driveway for a few hours with not a soul to come by, save the occasional Secret Service agent, a man in khaki slacks and a blue polo came striding towards me. He was older, seventies perhaps, and looked vaguely familiar to me, but only in the sense that all old white men tend to be. He wasn't wearing any badge, so I stepped in his path and asked to see some identification, my one responsibility. "I don't have time for this," he said, waving his hand dismissively. He tried walking around me. You could say I was still smarting from earlier but his self-importance annoyed me and when he got close I grabbed him by the arm and yanked him back in front of me, it didn't take much effort. He fucking exploded.

"How dare you touch me," he said with a disgust so genuine it bordered on self-parody.

"No unauthorized personnel past this point."

"Are you dumb or something?" By the look on his face you'd think I had a dick growing out of my forehead.

"Of course I'm authorized, I'm the god damn SecDef!"

That's right it was Don-fucking-Rumsfeld! As soon as he said that I recognized him, and yes, I know, as a Marine I should have recognized Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense, his picture did hang in every one of our offices, after all. But, to be fair, I had only ever seen him wearing a suit and glasses, neither of which he had on then, and neither did he

have his usual entourage of aides trying to keep up with him. Anyway, fuck that guy.

“Get out of my way, I have meetings to get to.”

He tried shoving past me again but I held him in place. Even though I recognized him I remembered Sgt Zak, “check IDs and badges.” My failure to stand up to Cheney had put me in a work-to-rule kind of mood, and I told Rumsfeld that I couldn’t let him past without some identification. This did not go over well.

“Listen here you dumb grunt, I am your Secretary of Defense and I am ordering you to let me pass.”

“Do you have identification to prove this, sir?” I was feeling myself a bit and let it show. I was also thinking of Cody again and wondering if his Humvee had been properly armored.

“I don’t have to show you anything. Do you not recognize me? Call your commander up right now.”

“He’s busy, sir.”

“I said now!”

It was then that Sgt Zak drove up in a golf cart, doing his rounds checking on all the posts.

“Tell me you outrank this imbecile,” Rumsfeld said, nearly running towards the cart.

“I am the Sergeant of the Guard, yes. Is there a prob—”

Rumsfeld cut him off, “I want this moron relieved of duty! He assaulted me and refuses to let me pass.”

Sgt Zak looked at me with a “Is that true” kind of look.

I shrugged. “He’s got no ID or security badge.”

Rumsfeld nearly choked.

Zak looked exhausted—being SOG during a visit is no rose garden after all, having to coordinate with half a dozen different agencies and staffs.

“Let him pass, Corporal.”

“Cant. No ID. Goes against the General Orders.”

“I don’t know what sort of incompetent operation you run here, Sergeant, but you can guarantee I’ll be speaking to your commanding officer about it.” Rumsfeld knew he had won.

“I’m ordering you to let him pass, Corporal.” Sgt Zak said, emphasizing my (lower) rank.

Now I’ll say here that I love Sgt Zak, he’s a good guy, but I fucking resented him in that moment. There were rules for a reason. Guidelines we were supposed to follow and adhere to. I’d be failing my duty if I were to allow Rumsfeld to just walk around them and it pissed me off that I was being told to do just that. I clenched my fists and stared hard at Rumsfeld, but I had done all I could. It wasn’t enough, not even close, but I had to let him pass.

Sgt Zak relieved me after that. Told me to go back to my room and get my head straight before my shift tomorrow morning, it’s been a stressful day for all of us, he said. My room was the last place I wanted to be, though. I couldn’t just lay down and stare at the ceiling, Cody and my orders and Iraq all floating around my head with nowhere to hide. I wanted to unthink. Ignore everything, pretend I could go back to a few weeks ago when everything was clear and not complicated. Before the inconvenience of Right versus Wrong, when duty still granted a sense of agency in the face of the inevitable. Even now, more so even, I wish that were possible. I skipped my room and headed over to Eucalyptus where there was a bar and pool tables and a small arcade. Sometimes that’s enough.

Golden-Tee was my game of choice. You know, arcade golf. There was something soothing in the way you had to roll your hand over the big white ball on the controller, how, if you were good enough, could get the perfect backspin for Pebble Beach, or hit just the right angle on the doglegs of Torrey Pines. I wasn't the best player, but I had been marching my initials up the leaderboard since I had arrived at Camp David. The one legacy I'd leave behind.

Anyway, I was two strokes in to the fifth hole at TPC Sawgrass when someone elbowed me in the ribs during my swing, causing me to slice into the woods. I turned around ready to cuss out the offending asshole when I came face-to-face with Trailblazer himself.

Of fucking course.

"Nice swing there, hoss," he says in that long-practiced drawl of his, like we all don't know he's a fucking WASP from New England. And then do you know what he said?

And this is no shit, but he says "How bout we play a game? They've had me in meetings all day and I'll be damned if I don't need some relaxation." I was done with this shit. Should have just stayed in my room and sucked it up, faced my emotions head on, or at least pretend I could ignore them. Or read a fucking book. Anything other than falling into the same traps with these fucking guys. To be humiliated over and over, to be used and discarded. Like Cody and the countless other wasted youth of our generation—American or otherwise—to get churned up in the political machinations of the feckless elite, selling our sacrifice as something heroic and victorious rather than the pointless political capital it truly is. Yes, that's right, I said it. Every death was meaningless. Past, present, and future. And before you start calling me cruel, defeatist, or un-American or whatever, remember that I was there. Witnessed it all first-hand.



To the extent that any of it meant anything is completely limited to whether you survived or not. Some of us did. A lot of us didn't. Of course, we're at fault too, which is honestly the most angering part of this whole fucking mess. We can't escape our own complicity in the things we did, the things we wished for, the things we allowed to happen. None of that excuses those at the top, however, and I'll continue to vent my fucking rage for it all towards them, the most deserving. I thought it took years for my anger to show itself, long after my first deployment, but retelling this story now I can see it manifested much earlier.

Now listen fucking close because this is what I've been building to. Cheney, Rumsfeld? Fucking appetizers for the main course. Absurdity injected into the veins. So absurd it can only be true, and that's no shit. Here it is:

I stopped playing right away, not bothering to finish the hole, and headed for the door.

"Sorry, sir, but I need to get some sleep before my shift in the morning."

He grabbed my shoulder, stopping me.

"Now hold on their, honcho. I could really use something to take my mind off all these damn dreary meetings I been in all day."

"I really have to sleep, sir."

"Am I gonna have to pull rank here?" He laughed. "Come on, son. Join me in a game."

That spark came back. That feeling from earlier with Cheney. Maybe it was the drawl, or his buddy-buddy good-natured attitude, but something told me to push back.

“Let’s play.”

Bush ordered a Frito Pie from the bar and then picked out which course we would play. He chose one of the computer-generated maps where each hole was a Frankenstein collection of memorable hazards, greens, doglegs, and fairways from the various PGA courses. He called it an even playing field, which I assumed meant that he thought I had memorized all the real-life courses, which I had.

The first hole was a narrow but straight par-four with a sloping green. We both drove the fairway easily and ended up just short of the rough that sat between fairway and green. I decided to lay my next shot onto the green down-hill of the hole. There wasn’t much green there, so I had to be careful with my backspin, I didn’t want the ball rolling back into the rough. I thought of trying to lob my ball over and letting it roll down toward the hole, but I was afraid of hitting it too far and landing in the bunkers behind the green or again, have too much backspin and watch it roll right past and into the rough. So, I played it safe. Everything went according to plan; my ball landed right where I wanted it, and I made a firm, but smooth four-foot putt for a birdie.

“Not bad there, sport,” Bush said.

I allowed myself a knowing smile. It was a challenging, but fairly routine shot and putt to make. Nothing you’d brag about back at the clubhouse over beers, but still a solid display of knowledge and skill.

Bush was up and I figured he’d go for the same safe play. I didn’t expect his short game to be as good, but he could at least make par. Instead, he hit a high arching shot over the hole, landing at the top of the green. The ball rolled downhill straight for the hole, picking up speed until it hit the cup and bounced three or four inches into the air and came right back down. An eagle.

“You’ll have to do better if you wanna beat me, chief,” he said, nudging me again with his elbow.

His Frito pie arrived and he took a big spoonful before quickly spitting it out and blowing out his mouth.

“Hot hot hot!” he said, a string of melted cheese dangling from his chin.

I had to beat him. There was absofuckinglutely no god damn way I could allow myself to be humiliated by this asshole. It. Wasn’t. Going. To. Happen. This was where I’d make my stand. Like the fucking Spartans at Thermopylae. Gandalf and the Balrog The Alamo. I got down into a proper fighting stance behind that big white ball and pressed the button for the next hole.

The battle that ensued was an epic on par with the greats of Marine Corps legend. And like those battles many of the details have since been lost to history—and traumatic brain injury. I can tell you that Bush pulled ahead early, and for a while the issue was in doubt. My short game became inexplicably bad as I put my ball into bunkers and rough and even a water hazard. But Bush had his slip ups, too, and I managed to keep within five strokes. By the third hole, the other Eucalyptus patrons had begun to gather round and it didn’t take long for sides to form along strict class lines. Political appointees, staff members, and officers were all Team Trailblazer. Bar staff, along with my fellow enlisted; soldiers, sailors, airman and Marines; stood on the side of the righteous. The cheering was quiet at first, respectable golf claps, oohs and awes, but devolved into near chaos during the back nine as insults were traded, bets made. At one point, an NSC staffer and Navy Seabee stepped outside to settle an argument, returning bloodied and shirtless minutes later. The biggest shit talker was Bush himself, never missing an opportunity to jab my ribs and point out a failed wind consideration or improper club choice. I remained quiet.

Focused. I made no fancy shots, but also never repeated a mistake, and slowly caught up one birdie at a time.

By the final hole we were even. Bush had finished his swings and putts, making par. I was on the green, one twelve-foot putt away from a birdie and the win. The room was silent. I approached the console.

The bar door burst open then and we all turned to see Angler stride in visibly annoyed.

“God damnit, George, do you know what time it is in Iraq right now? We have to get back to the matter-at-hand.” Cheney said.

“Don’t get your panties in a wad, Dick, my game is almost over.” Bush replied, gesturing towards the console and me.

To my surprise, he recognized me.

“Ah, look who it is,” Cheney said, smirk on his face.

This was it. That earlier feeling of resistance that had been simmering all game suddenly rose to the surface again. It was more intense this time and I felt it give me strength, felt my body fill with the force of something cosmic. This fucking subconscious primal instinct told me that this, this was the most important thing I’d ever do, that I had to hold firm no-matter-fucking-what, that I wasn’t just doing this for myself but the whole god damned human race, and this moment right now would change the fate of fucking planets. I thought of Cody and myself and the nameless other thousands whose fates were not theirs and I got down behind that white ball and rolled it back and then forward with my palm in one smooth motion and the golf ball marched forward towards the waiting maw of the cup and it marched and marched with the curves of the green and it slowed and then slowed some more until it reached the edge of the cup and teetered into oblivion.

The crowd erupted and someone was shaking me, congratulating

me. “New High Score” flashed across the screen and without hesitating, I entered Cody’s initials. I turned back toward Bush and Cheney, triumphant and defiant.

They both smiled and shared a look between them as if they were gods among mere mortals, and laughed.

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## **New Fiction from Steven Kiernan: “All Your Base Are Belong to Us”**



“Exposition La Commune de Paris à l’Hôtel de Ville de Paris,” 1871. Photographer unknown.

For the amputees of Walter Reed Army Hospital, Segways were the new fad. It had become common to see roving gangs of them, upright and speeding across campus and through the hospital, riding in elevators and waiting in line at the cafeteria or pharmacy, causing a flurry of complaints from doctors and staff. And when Doc Rodriguez looked up from his physical therapy mat and saw Anthony cruising down the hall on one, a public affairs officer plastered against the wall as he sped by, Rodriguez couldn’t help but smile.



Rodriguez had been feeling sluggish, unmotivated. Kristen, his therapist, had tried getting him to do some core work with a medicine ball, but he stopped as soon as her attention moved

on to another patient. He was about to leave when, through the glass windows that made up the room's far wall, he saw Anthony. Anthony had gotten his Segway a few weeks prior from an organization that was donating them to wounded vets, and he hadn't gone anywhere without it since. Rodriguez had tried riding one, but it bucked him off like a horse when he awkwardly attempted to step up with his prosthetics, and that was enough for him. Anthony parked the Segway against a wall and then joined Rodriguez on the stretching mat.

"What's up, Rod?" Anthony asked.

Rodriguez shrugged.

"Yeah, yeah, I know what you mean. Hey, we gotta hit up some Halo later. Gotta practice for the tourney next week. Can't let Jeff and those army assholes beat us again."

"For sure. Talk to Juan and the guys lately?"

"Nah, haven't seen them online for like a week. Wonder what they're up to?"

"Getting ready for another deployment, probably."

Anthony paused.

"Miss those guys."

They were silent for a while; Rodriguez picking at an ingrown hair on the stump of his left leg, Anthony brushing dandruff off his shoulder. There was a commotion in the hallway and Rodriguez looked up to see some officer striding towards the entrance with a gaggle of aides scurrying around him, one of whom broke off ahead and opened the door shouting, "Officer on deck!" to everyone in the PT room. When the officer, a colonel, entered he waved his hands saying, "At ease, at ease," despite no one having gotten up to begin with.

"Must be the new base commander," Anthony whispered. "Looks

like an asshole.”

“That’s just how officers look,” Rodriguez said.

The colonel was now walking towards the center of the room, “Don’t mind me, gents. I’m Colonel Darby, new Commanding Officer of Walter Reed. I’m here to introduce myself and get the lay of the land, to see how the sausage is made, if you will.”

His aides, a group of lieutenants and captains, stood behind him, their hands on their hips.

“Definitely an asshole,” Anthony said.

The room then shifted back to its normal atmosphere. Patients returned to their workouts and conversations, therapists moved from mat to mat, treadmill to treadmill. Colonel Darby stalked around the room, asking questions about exercise machines and what unit people had served with, which they grudgingly put up with. His jovial attitude wore off slightly with each conversation. When he moved on, a captain appeared and handed the patients a heavy challenge coin with the Colonel’s name on it. Eventually, he made his way to Rodriguez and Anthony.

“So, what are your names?” Darby asked, arms crossed tightly.

Time for another life story, Rodriguez thought. They had all been through these conversations before with every fucking VIP that came by. He was about to speak, but Anthony beat him to it.

“I’m Anthony and this here is Rod,” Anthony cracked his knuckles, causing Darby to flinch. “We got blown up together, which is pretty cool. I think. We were both—”

“Do you have a rank?”

Rodriguez and Anthony exchanged glances. “Well, I’m a lance

corporal.”

“And you?” Darby nodded.

“HM2 Rodriguez.”

“HM2? I’m not familiar with Navy ranks.”

“It means I’m a petty officer, an E-5.”

“Sir,” Darby said.

“Hm?”

“You will address me as Sir, HM2 Rodriguez,” Darby said, drawing out the syllables in Rodriguez’s name and rank and jabbing his finger into Rodriguez’s shoulder.

The room was quiet again and he could feel a dozen pairs of eyes on him.

“I’m an E-5,” Rodriguez repeated. He lowered his eyes to the floor, deflating his previous confidence, before adding, “Sir.”

Darby smiled and leaned back.

“E-5. An NCO. Tell me, *petty* officer, how is it everyone here is so undisciplined? Going by first names, not respecting rank. Have you forgotten you’re all still soldiers? Why are you not ordering them to wear authorized PT gear? Why do half the soldiers in here not have proper haircuts? I didn’t want to believe the reports of poor morale around here, but now I completely understand.” He was no longer speaking to Rodriguez but addressing the whole room. “There are going to be some changes around here. It’s time you all started looking and acting like soldiers again instead of a bunch of moping civilians. You’ve lost your pride.”

“Actually, some of us are Marines, sir,” Anthony said.

Darby glared at him and then stormed out of the room, followed by his aides.

\*

Every now and again, despite not having feet, Doc Rodriguez took the bus up Georgia Avenue to the Wheaton Mall and bought a pair of shoes. These were the only trips he took outside of Walter Reed since arriving from Iraq eight months ago, and so he liked to make the most of them. Months in a wheelchair had taught him how people tip-toed around him, afraid to make the slightest insult. It amused him to watch them squirm.

Col. Darby had been in command for over a week now and the hospital was beginning to feel even more suffocating than usual. Every wounded warrior (a term Darby had grown fond of repeating) living in the barracks now had to attend 0700 accountability formations. Authorized PT gear was made the uniform of the day, no longer could they wear what they wanted or what was most comfortable. Wounded warriors had to check-in and out with the SNCOIC every time they went to an appointment, which was often multiple times per day. There was even talk of a curfew being put into effect. Rodriguez needed some kind of escape. So he went to the mall.

When he reached the shoe store, Rodriguez rolled straight to the athletic section. Two salesmen behind the counter exchanged looks of confusion with each other before pretending to be busy on the computer. No doubt hoping he would leave, Rodriguez thought. After a few minutes picking up shoes, checking the flexibility of the toes, comparing their weight, the younger of the sales reps, a lanky teen who hadn't yet filled out his overgrown frame, cautiously approached.

"Looking for a gift for someone?"

"Nope," Rodriguez inspected the tread of a running shoe.

"Well, that's a great runner right there," the rep said,

rubbing his hands together and looking back at his comrade, who was still feigning interest in the computer screen.

“It’s got great tread for cross-country and is very light weight. And the sides here allow your feet—” he paused, a hint of panic in his eyes. Rodriguez said nothing and waited for him to continue— “um, they allow your feet to breathe.”

Rodriguez raised an eyebrow, wondering how long the kid could last before bursting into a frantic apology. But he’d had his fun, and instead asked if they had them in size ten; a good, solid size, he thought.

The sales rep made a quick glance towards Rodriguez’s nonexistent feet. “Let me go check.” He disappeared into the back of the store, the other rep following close behind.

Rodriguez knew he was being an asshole. It made him feel good, normal, like he still had some control over his life. If that meant some ableds had to feel uncomfortable for a minute or two, then so be it, they could walk it off.

The lanky rep came back out, alone this time, and Rodriguez met him at the cash register. The rep removed the security tag and boxed up the shoes, asking Rodriguez how he would like to pay. He was relaxed now that he was making a sale. Rodriguez was about to respond when he was grasped around the neck. Whoever it was squeezed tightly. Rodriguez could feel their body pressing against his back and shoulders.

“Excuse me,” Rodriguez said.

The arms gently released and he turned to see an old woman. She was somewhere in her sixties, seventies maybe, judging by her gray, dry hair and purple fanny pack. He could see tears welling up in her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry I just couldn’t help myself. I saw you and just had to come over and hug that poor soldier. I just can’t

imagine what you've been through."

"Sailor."

"What was that?"

"I'm a sailor," he said, pointing to his shirt which read "NAVY" in big block letters across his chest. "A Navy Corpsman."

"Oh, I apologize, I just assumed. What's a corpsman?"

Rodriguez sighed. Nobody ever knows what the fuck a corpsman is.

"A medic for Marines."

"That sounds wonderful, sweetie. A real hero! Please, let me buy these shoes for you."

She had already pulled out her card from the fanny pack and was handing it over the counter before Rodriguez knew what was happening.

"No, ma'am, it's really all right. I can—"

"Oh no, don't you worry. It's the least I could do to thank you for your service. You boys really have done so much for this country."

"Thanks, but—"

She pulled him in for another hug, nearly yanking him out of his chair. When she was done, she kissed the top of his head, signed her receipt and left. What the fuck? The sales kid was stifling a laugh.

He sat at the bus stop, waiting to return to the hospital and hoping no one else would talk to him. Other than a few confused glances at his shoebox and the empty space where his legs used to be, no one bothered him. He wanted to shrink into

his chair and disappear. When the bus arrived, he waited for everyone to board before moving to the door and asking the driver to lower the lift in the back.

“Didn’t notice you there,” the bus driver said. He was a big man and had to rock himself forward a few times to build enough momentum to get out of his chair, but once he was up the bus driver was surprisingly quick. “My apologies, folks. Gotta help get this young man get loaded up.”

He met Rodriguez at the back of the bus. “This’ll take no time,” he said, reaching for the lift controls, as if Rodriguez hadn’t done this a hundred times before, and didn’t in fact know that the lift was slow as hell. Rodriguez could see the other passengers watching through the windows, visibly annoyed that their ride was being delayed. When the lift was finally lowered, he reached for his wheels, but the bus driver beat him to it, grabbing onto his chair and pushing and guiding him onto the ramp.

“Hey,” Rodriguez said, “I got it.”

“I just want to make sure you get on nice and straight. See?”

“Fine, whatever.” He just wanted to get on board.

“Make sure you lock your wheels, I’d be all shook up if you rolled off backwards once this thing is up in the air.”

“I’m good. I’m holding on to the rails.”

The bus driver ignored him and locked the wheels himself.

Rodriguez wanted to scream at the man but didn’t want to make this already ridiculous scene any bigger, and so he bit his lower lip instead. The other passengers were huffing and sighing, checking their watches and phones with annoyance. It was embarrassing to be such an inconvenience. When Rodriguez was finally aboard, the bus driver pulled out some hooks and straps, and used them to anchor the chair to the floor.

Rodriguez again tried to protest, he hated the idea of being locked in place, unable to move until someone came and untied him, but the bus driver, all smiles and stupid jokes, ignored him again.

\*

Back in his room, Rodriguez tossed the shoebox on top of the dresser and transferred from his chair to the bed, shoving a pile of clothes out of the way. He was tired, mentally drained. No, it went deeper than that, he thought. Spiritually drained, that was a better word for it, but not in the religious sense. Mentally, he could take anything, had taken everything, but this place was wearing him down in other ways. And now Darby. Rodriguez was still pissed about their first encounter. *Address me as Sir*, he thought. *Act like soldiers*. Where the fuck did he think he was? Like we don't have more important shit to worry about than getting a fucking haircut every week. And that dumb grin. He should have just stuck to his guns.

He couldn't dwell on it, he thought. Negative emotions will just demoralize the patient, making their survival less certain. Always direct their attention elsewhere. He began to run through the procedure for bandaging a sucking chest wound: stop the bleeding, seal the wound with plastic, you don't want any air entering the chest cavity, place a bandage on top of the plastic and tie it around the chest for good pressure, roll the victim onto their injured side while awaiting evacuation, monitor for shock. When he was done with that, Rodriguez moved on to treating immersion foot, pitted keratolysis, where to place a tourniquet and for how long.

After several minutes his phone chirped with a text message: *get online bitch*. It was Juan, one of his old squad mates still down at Camp Lejeune. Rodriguez reached over to the nightstand for an Xbox controller and microphone and logged on.

“Hey, Doc, how’s it goin, dude?”

“Same old shit, man,” Rodriguez said, “It’s good to hear from ya.”

“Fuck yeah, man. Ain’t nothin new here, just playing some Call of Duty while the boots do working parties.”

“Ha ha, just like the old days.”

Rodriguez wished he could be back there, dealing with all the bullshit, but these game sessions went a long way to make him still feel connected, still part of a unit. When he first arrived at Walter Reed, the doctors and therapists kept going on and on about his “new normal” and how once he got adjusted he wouldn’t feel different at all. A life of adventure awaited; wheelchair basketball, handcycling across the country, sit-skiing down Breckenridge, fucking hiking up Kilimanjaro, and all that other inspirational horseshit everyone expected them to be doing. *New normal*, he scoffed. Fuck all that. He just wanted to feel normal normal.

“Aint the same without you, Doc. These new corpsmen we got are boot as fuck. Could use you down here training ‘em up.” There was a commotion on the other end and Rodriguez had to pull the headphones off when the sound started banging around and scraping in his ear.

“Yo, Doc, you legless asshole.” It was his old roommate, Benjamin, clearly drunk.

Rodriguez laughed. “Benji, what’s up, brother?”

“Corporal Benji to you, you fucking squid.”

They continued like that for a couple hours, shit talking back and forth, Rodriguez asking what training they were up to, if they got their next deployment orders yet. Afghanistan, Juan said, though he didn’t know where exactly. They were heading out next week for mountain warfare training in California,

they'd be gone for a few weeks. Even though he had hated combat, hated how afraid it made him, hated bandaging up his friends, had felt relief when he woke up in Germany with no legs, knowing he'd never have to do it again, Rodriguez had a sudden, deep longing to go with them, and when he logged off and turned out the light, he fell asleep fantasizing about not having been blown up, about getting drunk in the barracks, about training in California, about the mountains of Afghanistan.

\*

The next day, after physical therapy, Anthony came over to Rodriguez's room to play some Halo. It was a usual routine for them after PT and helped them relax after working out for two or three hours. Though Rodriguez would never admit it out loud, playing video games made him feel like his old self, back when he didn't need any kind of handicap or special equipment to play sports or any other activity. They were the one thing that made him feel like he was still equal and whole.

There was a knock at the door and Anthony got up to open it. It was Jeff, their Halo tourney rival. He pushed past Anthony and walked in.

"Yo, you trying to steal our strats or what?" Anthony said.

"Like I need to. You noobs can practice all you want but you'll never beat me and the LAN Warriors."

Rodriguez rolled his eyes. "You idiots still using that dumbass name?"

Jeff waved him off, "I'm not here to talk about that. Colonel Darby is doing room inspections. Just finished with the second floor."

"What, here?" Anthony said. "Are you serious?"

“Yeah I’m fucking serious. Asshole just burst into my room and chewed my ass out for leaving one of my arms on the bed and clothes on the floor.”

The three of them surveyed the room. The “barracks” they lived in was actually a former hotel, converted for use as overflow patient housing when amputees began coming home in unexpectedly large numbers, and like most hotels was not an ideal long-term living solution. Every inch of floor space not necessary for wheelchair traffic was covered in luggage bags and spare limbs, a collection of t-shirts and knitted blankets lay in the corner, growing with every new tour of American Legion and VFW groups to come through. Clothes were haphazardly piled on the guest bed and the small garbage can was overflowing with empty Red Bull cans and soda bottles. The bed sheets were open and scrunched to the side. A collection of magazines, pizza boxes, and orange pill bottles lay across the desk.

“Well, it smells all right,” Anthony said.

The door swung open and in walked Col. Darby, who gave the room a quick once over and then stood in front of the TV.

“HM2 Rodriguez, why am I not surprised?”

“You tell m—”

“I’ll tell you why, HM2 Rodriguez. I’m not surprised by the state of this,” Darby scanned the space again, “*room* because every gosh darn room so far has looked exactly the same. Clothes every which way. Pizza boxes, spit bottles, pop cans,” he hesitated, “pornography.”

“And I’ll tell you something else, HM2...”

Rodriguez could have sat there silently and taken the ass-chewing like he did earlier. Just stare and say a couple of “Yessirs,” maybe squeeze in an “Aye Aye, sir” just to throw

Darby off a bit, a slight stick of the needle so he could feel smug about it later. Then toss him some platitude like "I'll get right on it, sir" with no intention of actually following through, but offering just enough to make Darby feel like he had accomplished something so he could leave.

And that's exactly what Rodriguez did, Anthony and Jeff following his lead. But when Darby finally reached the end of his self-indulgent tirade he said something that caught Rodriguez off guard.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"I said, HM2, that I'm tired of seeing all of these Nintendos. I don't believe in coincidences and I believe there is a direct correlation to the lack of discipline around here and those darn machines."

Nintendos? he thought. "Do you mean video games, sir?"

"Don't correct me, HM2. Give me anymore attitude and I'll be speaking with...whoever it is in charge of you."

"Aren't you in charge of me, sir?" Rodriguez allowed himself a slight grin.

"You find this amusing, do you? Well, I think I've seen enough here. It's obvious what the problem is. Captain!" An aide appeared at Darby's side as if she had been there the whole time. "I want you to call IT and instruct them to shut off network access for all...video games." She nodded and pulled out a Blackberry.

"You can't do that," Anthony nearly shouted.

Darby regarded him, "It's my base, son."

"You can't mess with our personal time like that," Rodriguez countered. "We're," he searched for the right word, something Darby would understand, "off-duty!"

“You’re never off-duty when you live on base.”

“But, we’re fucking hospital patients!”

“And that’s exactly my point. You all need to get back in the right mindset. You’re not hospital patients, you’re soldiers! And soldiers don’t play video games, they train. You should be working on PME’s for promotion boards or taking online college courses. There are plenty of more productive activities you could be doing. Believe me, I’m doing you a favor.”

“But, sir,” Rodriguez pleaded, all the resistance in him from a moment before had drained out, “I know it’s hard to understand, but this is important for us. All of us. It’s how I keep in touch with the guys in my unit.” He hoped that would be enough, that Darby could at least sympathize with that.

“You have a cell phone, don’t you? Shut it down, captain.”

She was still holding the phone to her ear but gave a thumbs up.

“Why don’t you three spread the word.”

\*

They gathered at the smoke pit in the courtyard. A few dozen soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines in wheelchairs and on crutches. Some listened from their windows, their heads and arms dotting the walls of the hotel which surrounded the courtyard on three sides. They were angry. They were powerless. Who do we blame? The colonel? For most of them he only existed in the abstract; some liminal force both real and unreal, capable of controlling their lives, their actions, manipulating their fears and desires towards his own ends. Another authority free of accountability. And so they blamed each other. Arguments spread over who hadn’t been keeping their room clean, who spent more time playing Xbox or Playstation, who didn’t cut their hair, shave, bathe, didn’t

render a proper salute, act professionally, ate too much pizza or Chinese takeout—

“Enough!” Rodriguez shouted.

He made his way to the front of the group, wheelchairs parting to let him through. All eyes reluctantly turning to him.

“Are we really going to turn on each other? Over one asshole’s stupidity?” That got him a few laughs. “An asshole who’s been here all of a few days and already thinks he knows how to the run the place, who thinks he can barge into *our* rooms, *our* PT building whenever he pleases? Humiliate us?” Hell no, someone shouted. Rodriguez pointed at Jeff, “How long have you been here?” Thirteen months, Jeff replied. He pointed at someone else, “How long have you been here?” Ten months. “And you,” he pointed to his left, “how long have you been here?” Two years, was the answer. Rodriguez paused and let that sink in.

“Walter Reed exists for us. *We* are the reason for that state-of-the-art PT building. *We* are the reason celebrities and politicians come here, supplying *them*,” he pointed towards the administrative buildings, “with good PR and propaganda. *We* are the reason their budget has been doubled.” Hell yeah! Damn straight! The crowd was nodding and clapping in agreement. “I don’t know about you all, but I’m tired.” Real fuckin tired! A shout from the middle of the crowd. “Tired of people grabbing my chair without permission.” Yeah! “Tired of having my therapy interrupted by some chicken hawk senator or b-list actor offering to take a picture with me.” Fuck those douchebags! “Tired of being told about my ‘new normal.’” Hear, hear! Hell, yeah! Speakin truth! “Tired of being forced to live up to everyone *else’s* expectations of how we should think and act!” Furious applause. “And I’m fucking tired of thinking we have no control around here!” The crowd was wild, clapping and waving canes in the air, surging towards him. “WE run this place!” Rodriguez shouted over the noise. A chant began seemingly from everyone all at once, “No play, no work!

No play, no work! No play, no work!"

Back inside the group gathered around Rodriguez. It had grown larger as more people came down from their rooms and into the open lobby.

"What are your orders, Doc?" Anthony asked.

"I'm not giving any orders. But we do need to organize. We'll need volunteers." Everyone raised their hand. "Good, strength in numbers. First off, we'll need some counter-intel. People who can make some posters for propaganda and psy ops."

"I can do that," Anna said. She was an air force staff sergeant who had lost her left arm in a rocket attack. She was fairly new, having only been here a few months. Normally, she kept to herself in her room, went to PT in the afternoon when fewer people were there. She wasn't timid, Rodriguez thought, just quiet. He nodded to her and she raised her one fist in acknowledgement and then left to gather more members for her team.

"Okay, hopefully we won't need it, but a direct-action team would be nice."

"That's got my name all over it, Doc," Jeff said.

"Focus on gathering stuff to use as barricades, we'll need to be ready to block the entrances and stairwells in case they try to force us out."

"Roger that." Jeff raised his fist.

"Everyone else should help out where needed. Prepare some defenses or gather up enough food and meds to last us a few days. We're not going to ANY appointments until we get our video games back. They can't punish us all if we stick together!"

Rodriguez turned to Anthony. "I've got a special mission for

you.”

Two days later they were still holding strong. That first night, Rodriguez had called Darby’s office and stated their demands. He hung up before the colonel’s aide could respond. Soon after, all internet access in their rooms was shut off. They’d heard nothing since. But morale among them had never been higher. With no instruction they had eagerly organized themselves into four-man fireteams, each responsible for a set of windows or hallways. A rotating guard shift was set up at every entrance and a direct-action team waited in the lobby ready for anything. The building custodial staff had given them the keys to the building, raising their fists to Rodriguez when they handed them over, and now they had unlimited access to the cafeteria as well as the roof, where they posted lookouts. The staff had also donated a few sets of walkie talkies, which were distributed throughout the building. If Darby thought he could wait them out, Anna had said, he was mistaken.

“Man, we shoulda done this sooner,” Jeff said. “I’m fuckin’ pumped.”

“It’s nice to feel useful again,” Anna replied.

“I’m just glad to be a burden on my own terms for once,” Rodriguez said. The others nodded.

*OP1 to HQ, movement on the northwest of the courtyard. Coming down the path, looks like Darby and some aides, over.*

Anna clicked on her radio, *Roger that, OP1, out.* “Looks like he finally wants to talk.”

“We’ll see,” Rodriguez said.

They waited for Darby to come closer, so he could see what they had left for him. All along the building, along all three sides of the courtyard, the windows were plastered with

posters. NO PLAY, NO WORK was the most predominant, with others like FUCK THE POLICE and ALL YOUR BASE ARE BELONG TO US interspersed throughout. A large pirate flag hung from a window. From behind the glass doors Rodriguez could see Darby carefully scanning each sign, his disgust evident by the ever-growing scowl on his face. His aides stood nervously behind him. Rodriguez instructed the guard to unlock the door and then rolled out to meet him.

“This little insurrection of yours ends right now!” Darby said as soon as Rodriguez was out of the building. “If it doesn’t, I’ll have every last one of you charged and court martialed!”

Rodriguez snorted, “Good luck with that.”

“Listen here, Aitch. Em. Two, this facility will not be held hostage and I will not negotiate with insurrectionists. This insubordination will end—”

“I’m sorry but we don’t really care what you *think* is going to happen.”

“How dare you, you—”

“And we don’t much care for your indignant attitude.” A round of banging echoed across the courtyard as those watching from the windows drummed their canes on the window frames. “It’s time you recognized who holds the power around here. Us. You’re here to serve us, to make sure we’re getting the proper care we need. We’re through with being treated as if we were children on timeout. Now, turn the internet back on and restore our video game access and we’ll gladly return to our duties.” More drumming. The aides took cautious steps back.

“I will not be ordered around by some enlisted man, a petty officer! I’m in command here and you will shut this, this, this charade down!”

“I think we’d prefer not to.” Rodriguez smiled and crossed his

arms.

“Fine. Seize him!”

Darby’s aides hesitated a moment, and then rushed forward. A lieutenant grabbed his left arm and Rodriguez punched him in face. The lieutenant let out a sharp squeal that even had Rodriguez feeling embarrassed for him and crumpled to the ground. Before Rodriguez could reposition himself two captains clutched his arms from behind and tried to pull him out his chair.

“CHARGE!”

The captains paused and turned back to the building entrance. Out from the building burst Anthony on his Segway wearing a Che Guevara shirt followed by two others on Segways. They were wearing helmets and elbow pads, and wielding canes. Anthony pointed his cane forward like he was Patton galloping towards the enemy upon his steed.

“Go for their legs!” He shouted and soon they were upon the aides and slashing down on them. They rode circles around them, smacking and beating their thighs and calves. Projectiles were now reigning down from the windows; shoes, challenge coins, tomatoes; someone was firing BBs from a slingshot.

“Retreat!” Darby ordered. “Fall back!” The officers, laying in the fetal position, scrambled and stumbled to their feet. They sprinted shamelessly, trying to catch up with the colonel.

“NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK.” The chant grew louder as they shouted from their windows. The officers ran faster. Anthony and his team escorted Rodriguez back inside where the direct-action team prepared for a possible counterattack.

“Lock it down!” Rodriguez shouted.

Jeff reached for his radio and gave the signal, *Turtle up!*

*Turtle up!*

A flurry of activity ensued as they locked the doors. Empty wheelchairs and spare limbs and unused furniture that had been kept off to the side were now piled against the entrances. Fireteams on each floor pushed more wheelchairs down the stairwells. Every lookout and post were doubled up as they went to 100% security. Food and water were evenly distributed. Their time had come.

\*

Over the next thirty-six hours, the base MPs made several probing attacks. The colonel's goons first tried to get in through the front entrance, rather than attempt another courtyard gauntlet, but found the way blocked by a lifted, yellow H2 Hummer and a black Mercedes Benz AMG (both courtesy of the government's tax-free \$50k/per limb compensation to each amputee). They then attempted a night raid through the courtyard, thinking the resistance would be asleep. They were beaten back by a combination of million-candle-power flashlights and water balloons filled with urine. Jeff was particularly proud of that idea. Then, on the fifth day, the real assault began.

They heard it first. The unmistakable sound of boots on pavement, marching. The lookouts on the roof confirmed what the others already knew, this was no probe. *I count at least 50 headed towards the courtyard, over.* It took ten minutes for the MPs to file in, riot shields over their heads, boots clomping in a methodical rhythm, but the resistance held their fire. They formed up five troops wide, all that could fit through the doors at one time. Rodriguez, Anthony, Jeff, Anna and two dozen of Jeff's direct-action team stood ready to face them at ground level, a mountain of twisting metal and rubber separating the two sides.

Panic seized Rodriguez for a moment as he considered what was

about to happen and all he had done to bring it about. He may not have forced his comrades into mutiny, but he couldn't help but feel responsible for the real danger they all now faced. Had he been right? Were these actions justified? Was their cause doomed? He began to cycle through a dozen similar questions he hadn't contemplated before and the weight of it all nearly sent him to grab the nearest white flag, until Anthony placed an arm around his shoulders.

"If we could only see us now," Anthony said, smiling.

Rodriguez looked up and down the line and saw the same determination in every face. His panic passed. Doomed or not. Right or wrong. They were together.

It happened all at once. The MPs rushed forward, quickly smashing through the glass doors. The window teams opened fire with an assortment of heavy and disgusting objects. The MPs responded with pepper spray, but their range was limited and could only reach up to the second floor. Both sides dragged away their wounded. The front rows of MPs were grabbing and tossing all the debris in the blockade aside, passing it over their heads to be carried back and out of the way. "Hit em with the balloons!" Jeff barked. They crashed and broke against the barricade, spraying the MPs with all their contents. The front row disappeared as they retreated out of the line of fire but were quickly replaced by those behind them. The two sides repeated the cycle for several minutes, but the MPs were removing the debris far quicker than the resistance could deplete their ranks, and eventually the MPs broke through.

"LAN Warriors, charge!" Jeff sprinted towards the breach. Rodriguez nearly choked laughing, but he and the others followed right behind. The next moments were a blur of canes and batons being swung back and forth. Two men, one in a chair, the other on crutches, fell to the floor, blood spilling down their faces. They were quickly dragged off.

Rodriguez and the others were slowly being pushed back by the MPs, lacking the leg power needed to hold their ground. The MPs had given up on pepper spray now that they were in close quarters, switching to their tasers instead. Two more amputees on the left flank went down, bloodied, forcing the remaining men on that side to fall back and cede ground. The MPs quickly took advantage and Rodriguez and Jeff found themselves surrounded, batons coming in from all sides. Rodriguez fought back with all he had, swinging his cane like a baseball bat, chopping down like an axe. He smashed one MP in the nose, sending a gush of blood spraying out. Jeff knocked another out cold, he had lost his cane and was now punching any uniform he could reach. An intense pain surged through Rodriguez and he lost control of himself as his body seized up. He fell out of his chair and was convulsing on the ground as two MPs tried to drag him off.

He heard a scream from somewhere in the mass of bodies and he couldn't tell if it was one of his or one theirs, but then Anna burst from the crowd and threw herself at the MPs dragging him. "Get Doc outta here!" There were new hands on him now, dragging him away from the fight, further inside the building. Anthony screeched by on his Segway and drove straight into the mass of uniforms, disappearing as he flew over the handle bars. The last glimpse he got of Anna before the MPs surrounded her was of her swinging her prosthetic arm like a club.

\*

Now in the casualty collection point, Rodriguez had time to think again. He was badly bruised and sore from where his muscles had tensed themselves up into knots after being electrocuted but looking around it was clear he had gotten off easy. Nearly two dozen people lay about the floor in different states of shock and injury. Most had blood leaking from gashes in their heads, some lay unconscious, others had their arms in slings. A group in the far corner were busy pouring milk over

their faces and sitting in front of large fans. A man Rodriguez didn't recognize lay next to him, struggling to wipe the blood from his eyes with the stubs of his arms. Rodriguez leaned over and pulled a bandage from his pocket. He did his best to wipe the blood from the man's face and then applied the bandage to the wound on his forehead.

"Thanks, Doc," the man said before groggily closing his eyes.

It was all too much for him now as the panic crept its way back into his chest. How many had new concussions? Rodriguez thought. How many broken bones? How long would their recovery now be delayed because of these new injuries? He began to shake and he lost the strength in his arms, and fell back against the wall. He took another look around the room and nearly burst into tears. "I thought I was done with this," he said to himself. He could still hear the sounds of battle going on in the lobby. The banging, the shouting. He tried to cover his ears but the sounds were too loud and slipped past his fingers. There was only one thing he could do. He pushed himself back up and crawled from patient to patient, tending to their wounds.

The fight went on for thirty more minutes until the MPs retreated. A second direct-action team had arrived as Rodriguez was being pulled away and managed to hold the lobby. Jeff found Rodriguez and gave him the quick AAR: half of their resistance was injured, and of those, half could still fight. Several members were missing, including Anna and Anthony, and were presumed captured. They'd depleted all their water balloons and most of the projectiles. But, Jeff said, we still own this place. No MPs got past the lobby.

Rodriguez was quiet. Anna. Anthony. Everybody. They sacrificed themselves, for me, for my dumb plan, he finally said.

"No. They did it for themselves," Jeff answered. "Look around, man. Even with blood and pepper spray in their faces, they're

laughing.”

Word had spread of the MP’s retreat and the mood in the room had shifted to an exhilaration not unlike that after a firefight. The exhilaration of fear and of being alive. Of having fought and won. It became clear to Rodriguez that the outcome of this mutiny no longer mattered, had probably never mattered. He climbed back into his chair and he and Jeff headed to the lobby.

A voice from a bullhorn echoed in the courtyard.

“HM2 Rodriguez. I think we’ve all had enough of this and are ready to come to an agreement.” It was Darby. “Unless you’d rather I throw your friends in the brig.”

Rodriguez and Jeff approached the window. Darby stood in the courtyard with a team of MPs in SWAT gear. Anna and Anthony sat handcuffed and bandaged at his feet.

“That motherfucker,” Jeff said.

“I’m willing to restore full internet access and grant everyone immunity if you end this rebellion now,” Darby continued, “Well, not everyone. HM2 Rodriguez will have to face punishment. Someone has to, after all this destruction.”

“Fuck that, Doc. If anyone needs to be punished it’s that asshole.”

“No. We’ve won,” Rodriguez said. “We did it.”

“But you can’t just turn yourself—”

“I don’t want anyone else hurt over this.” Rodriguez looked over his shoulder at the guards by the doors, still defiant despite bandages on their heads and torn shirts, one of them raised his fist. “We got what we needed.”

Jeff nodded reluctantly and clapped his hand on Rodriguez’s

shoulder.

\*

It was silent when he rolled out to Darby. The grin and arrogance from Darby's face was gone. It was clear he hadn't slept at all for the past five days and looked as though he had lost twenty pounds, his uniform hanging off his shoulders and arms. Rodriguez raised his fist at Anna and Anthony and they both smiled in return. Darby said nothing to him, didn't even look at him, just signaled for the MPs who came and handcuffed Rodriguez's arms behind his back. They took hold of his chair and began pushing him towards a patrol car on the far side of the courtyard.

They were halfway down the courtyard when a single voice shouted from the windows, "NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Others joined in and the chant quickly spread around the courtyard.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK."

A prosthetic leg came sailing out from a third-floor window. Another came from the second floor across the way. Then an arm, a foot. More and more came tumbling out of the windows in a cascade of limbs all around the courtyard. The chant got louder and built up to a thunderous echo, bouncing off the walls and the trees, rising, rising, rising above the buildings and out across the street and into Rock Creek Park, down Georgia Ave and downtown and into the Capitol, the National Mall, the White House.

"NO PLAY, NO WORK. NO PLAY, NO WORK."

Rodriguez laughed and laughed, tears streaming from his eyes, as he was wheeled down the path and out of sight.

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# New Fiction: “Plink, Rack” by Steven Kiernan

✖ There are many moving parts in a gun. There’s the trigger, which most people mistakenly believe is what fires the whole thing. This is understandable. The trigger is elegant and shapely and romantic. Simple. Easy to comprehend. But, the trigger is just the instigator. It compresses a spring, slowly (or quickly) building up enough energy to pull back the hammer, a blunt object, which in turn hammers the firing pin, striking the primer and setting off the small explosion that jettisons the bullet out of the barrel and toward an intended target. The target is missed more often than not. The bullet is a part of the gun, but not *part* of the gun. They’re the only expendable bit. A gun will not fire unless all of these parts work together in that order. Otherwise, it is useless. If you have ever held a gun before you will recognize what a sad thought that is. Guns are too tempting not to fire. They are surprisingly heavy things, cold things, and when you hold one in your hand and feel its heft, its power, it makes you powerful, and for a moment in time you feel the urge to blow something away, anything. Sometimes this disgusts you. Sometimes not.

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Hal kept the rifle under his bed in a hard-plastic pelican case he surrounded with balled up clothes and used towels. It wasn’t hard to sneak on to the hospital campus. They stopped searching vehicles after the Army MPs were switched out with civilian security. The rifle was a Bushmaster carbine, not unlike the M16 he used to carry in Iraq. It was short and black and he liked to feel the weight of it in his hands.

Liked to lift it up into his shoulder and rack the bolt, which he kept properly lubricated so that it slid back in a smooth metallic fashion. Liked the *plink* sound the firing pin made when he pulled the trigger with an empty chamber. *Plink, rack. Plink, rack.* Hal never aimed in on children, but everyone else was fair game.

Odd numbered days.

Those were the days he would get the rifle from under the bed, remove it from the case, and rack the bolt a few times. Then he would hop over to the window on his one foot and sit down in the wheelchair he kept by a small round table, no more than two feet in diameter. It was the one surface in his room that was clear of debris. No dirty clothes or half-filled spit bottles. He'd settle in, leaning on his elbows, and aim the rifle out of the window and down into the courtyard below, which sat inside the "U" shape of the building. There was a large brick patio that stretched about fifty meters in length. It had barbeque grills and a couple dozen chairs and tables and during the summer was always busy with some cook-out or special event. A long walkway led out towards the main hospital and administrative buildings on the other side of the campus. Last summer, part of the walkway had been replaced with red bricks. You could purchase one for a hundred dollars and have it engraved with a name or message. The bricks sold out in less than a week as guys rushed to immortalize fallen comrades. For a few days after the bricks were laid, there was always at least one person out there in a wheelchair admiring the names of the less fortunate. But that was last summer. Now people tread upon the dead without ever looking down.

The smoke-pit was too close to the building and he couldn't get a decent line of sight without having to stand, but Hal had an easy vantage over the walkway and patio. He felt the cold plastic of the buttstock against his cheek as it warmed to match his temperature. The solvent smell of the gun oil sat inside his nose rather than slip into the back of his sinuses

and throat the way gunpowder did. He looked over his sights, searching for a target. Two soldiers in grey camouflage sat at a table in the patio area. They were both laughing and one was gesticulating wildly, accidentally knocking his beret off. Hal chose him. He settled his cheek back against the buttstock and peered through the iron sights. He aimed like he was taught. Center mass. Focus on the front sight post, not the target. Exhale. *Plink, rack.* He swiveled towards the other soldier. *Plink, rack.*

“Doing alright up there, Hal?” J asked from the driver’s seat.

“Just great,” Hal said from the turret.

It was eleven in the morning and already the temperature was over one hundred degrees. Standing inside a metal Humvee turret and wrapped in body armor Hal felt like he was in a microwave. He pulled off his sunglasses and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“I fucking hate pulling security for 1<sup>st</sup> platoon, man. Assholes just do not know how to search a compound,” J said.

Hal checked his watch. Almost forty-five minutes.

“Hajjis will start getting ideas if they take any longer.”

“I got ya, bro,” Hal said. He scanned the street with the ACOG on his rifle, the four-power scope giving him clear vision out past five hundred meters. Normally he would have had the machine gun, but it had been cannibalized to fix another and they hadn’t yet received a replacement. It was awkward being in the turret with just a rifle, like he was incomplete, less safe.

“This is just getting ridiculous.” J said.

Fifty-five minutes.

"You know, I was planning on going to film school before I enlisted." J said.

"No shit?"

"Had been accepted and everything. A real fucking Spielberg I wanted to be." He took off his helmet and tossed it on top of the radio. "Then I got this great fucking idea, *I'll join the Marines and then come back and make an epic war film,*" he said in a nasally voice. "Even told my recruiter about it."

"I bet he fucking loved that," Hal said. "Why didn't you go combat camera? He get you with the old 'Infantry is the only slot open right now' line?"

"Guilty as charged."

"So, how's your 'epic war film' working out? I bet it'll be realistic as fuck."

"Don't you worry, I got it all planned out. It's gonna be six hours long with only ten minutes of action. Ree-ah-lis-tic."

"Yeah. But those ten minutes though..."

J began to drum his fingers on the steering wheel and for a while that was the only noise in the Humvee.

"My grandfather fought in World War II," J said. He had quit the drumming and now gripped the steering wheel loosely. "Was on Tarawa and Saipan. Got shot on both. Saw some real shit. I used to bug him all the time as a kid, asking him to tell me war stories or to show me his medals. He never did though. Wasn't until just before I shipped out on my first pump that he told me anything. My mom threw this big going away party for me, invited the whole family. My little cousins were going wild running through the house and my uncles kept pulling me aside to shake my hand over and over and tell me how fucking

proud they all were. Anyway, I managed to sneak away into the den and found my grandfather sitting there alone. Fuck it, I thought, and asked him, Marine to Marine, what's it like? He shook his head a little bit and chuckled, then told me this joke:

*A man kicked his brother down the street.*

*A policeman shows up and says, "Hey, why are you doing that? You can't do that."*

*The man turns and says, "It's alright, he's dead anyway."*

"I didn't get it at the time, but after two tours to this shithole I think it's pretty fucking funny."

It was after noon now and the sun was directly overhead and seemed to have a kind of weight to it. Arms got heavier and shoulders slouched more, the color drained from the sky as it was slowly pushed back down towards earth until the horizon disappeared and looked like one big barrier. The weight of it all was unrelenting, purging all thought and leaving you apathetic and complacent. Time continued to pass but Hal no longer kept track of it. This part of the day was always the most dangerous.

Hal had turned the turret so that he could cover the left side of the Humvee, leaving J to watch the front from the driver's seat. Hal faced an alley that ran about two-hundred meters in length before it ended and split into a T-intersection. The squat cement-brick buildings along the sides held a dozen different shops and even a poolhall and they reminded Hal of public storage units back home with their metal roll-up doors. Nobody was out, which didn't surprise Hal, with the heat and all. He wiped some sweat from his eye and when he looked back up he saw a head peeking around a corner fifty meters away. After a few seconds it disappeared back behind the wall, then

popped out again a few seconds after that.

"I got someone turkey-peeking over here," Hal said.

"Mmm hmm," was all J said.

"He looks kinda shady,"

"Well, then pop off a couple rounds and let him know you see him."

Hal brought the rifle up into his shoulder and right as he did so, the man stepped from behind the corner into the open, a long tubular object resting on his shoulder.

"Oh, shit. He's got an RPG!"

"What?!" J said. Hal could sense him jerk towards the door window. "Shoot him, man. Shoot him!"

Hal could hardly believe what was happening. He had been in-country for five months, participated in at least a dozen firefights, but not once had he seen a live, no-shit enemy fighter. Even muzzle flashes were rare to spot. But here he was, fifty meters away, appearing large in his four-power scope. Hal could easily make out his details. Track pants, sandals, and a snot covered knock-off Affliction t-shirt. He could have stopped there, shot him in the chest and been done with it. But, he had to see his face.

"Shoot him!"

The patchy beard got his attention. How it grew in splotches, wide avenues of bare skin between them. It reminded Hal of his own attempts at facial hair while home on leave and how his girlfriend Dani would always give him shit for it. But it was the eyes, wide and white that gave him pause. It wasn't really fear that Hal saw, more disbelief. Like his body was moving and he was just along for the ride. The eyes of a first-time skydiver sitting on the edge of the plane looking down and

getting ready for the plunge. And it was there, between the white and spackles of flakey brown that Hal recognized him as more than a target. Hal had never shot at people before, only in directions or tree-lines or windows, and in that moment of realization he knew that he never could.

“Shoot him!”

He never heard the explosion, but he felt it. For half a second the air turned into a searing heat and an immense pressure squeezed his chest and he couldn't breathe. When he opened his eyes, he was on the floor of the Humvee, his rifle swung just above him, its sling still caught on the turret. He panicked a moment when he thought the vehicle was on fire, but calmed down when he realized the smoke was just a thick haze of kicked-up dust. He saw that his right foot was gone and he saw that J was dead.

There was no one else down on the patio and so Hal turned his attention to the walkway. It was empty now, but he knew if he just waited a few minutes someone would come. He flicked the safety on and off with his thumb. Five minutes later a patient in a wheelchair turned the corner down at the far end of the walkway and began rolling towards Hal and the patio below. Hal settled in like before, cheek snug against the buttstock. He exhaled. *Plink, rack*. There was a knock on his door. “Hey, Hal, ya in there?” Hal ignored it, he kept his aim on the patient in the wheelchair. *Plink, rack*. “What are you doing, man?” *Plink, rack*. It's alright, Hal thought. It's alright.

**Photo Credit: United States Marine Corps**