

The Way Up

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Bosky

Bosky had been trying to enjoy the first-person shooter. He had been drinking and James had been on the sofa next to him, drinking, sniffing, sighing in an annoying way, and refusing to play. It was hard to recall everything clearly given the amount of alcohol and kill-shots he was scoring, but it was possible James was crying.

“I don’t think you get it, Bosky,” James had said in between bursts of gunfire.
“It’s all over. I think I’m in love.”

“Yeah,” Bosky remembered saying. “Congratulations.”

“Every guy she’s ever dated died.”

“Okay.”

“You remember that story? About the sun? But there’s no sun, no way out, just nothing.”

“So, she arrested yet?” Bosky asked, trying to line crosshairs up to figures on the screen.

“No, I mean even the guys that are alive are dead. Do you get it now? It’s all over.”

Bosky recalled that conversation mainly because he’d been confused. Also because right after that moment he’d run out of bullets and had thrown a tomahawk into the pixelated face of an incoming enemy. It was sweet.

Next thing he knew, Bosky found himself waking up. There were empty beer cans, chips, and sunflower seed shells all across the carpet and no sign of James. His head pounded and he felt pretty sure he hated the world, that every person on earth was an asshole waiting to happen, and that life was a terminal hangover. The feeling had been so

overwhelming he opened the window and stuck his head outside. “Don’t you know?” he yelled as loud as he could, even though his voice scratched, his tongue was dry, and his eyes gummed. “It’s all over, so end already!”

His words rebounded with surprising vibrancy, but the streets were empty, the apartments and houses lining the block still and quiet. Nobody responded because there was nothing that could respond. Even the wind fell limp after he’d yelled. Bosky closed the window but the silence followed him inside.

When he tried to shower, he noticed the hole in his chest. No matter how long he stared, it was still there. Even when he went to the mirror it was unchanged, a wide, round space under his collarbone. Bosky blinked. He’d seen unhealthily skinny people before, the emaciated kind whose ribs all showed through. They had no flesh between the clavicles or over the sternum, their chests a landscape of ridges, skin stretched tight over jutting angles and spurs of bone. But Bosky had never been that thin, and the hole in his chest was wider and deeper than any one of those particular hollows, showing no underlying bone or structure, no edges. His sternum was completely missing in that strange gap, his ribs hollowed out in the middle to make space for space.

Panic seemed the appropriate response, but the emotion was not quick in coming, except in the vague worry that getting water into the depression seemed like a bad idea. When he thought a little longer it made sense he couldn’t panic. The hole wouldn’t have just contained bones, blood, and flesh. It was where his heart would have been. But it was all missing. Still, he needed to fill the void, at least to avoid complications in the shower.

He couldn’t find a proper substitute though. There was no sense in putting anything perishable or filthy in place of a heart, and there was the matter of size.

Shuffling and flipping through cupboards and drawers, Bosky pulled out little dishes and cups, ties and shirts he didn't wear anymore while the quiet stretched and floated. The things he found that could be rolled or maneuvered into his indent didn't seem quite right. He didn't want any object that was empty by itself; dishes and bowls were designed to contain something and clothes weren't clothes unless they were worn. They were all meant to contain, to be pieced with something else. But if he was going to replace his heart, he needed a complete thing, no gaps to be filled, no part of another, but a thing independent, whole in shape and purpose. Something that made noise.

He nearly lurched when a shrill jangle pierced the air. It was only when Bosky rushed over to the side of his bed that he realized it was his alarm clock, and that the steady tick of its hands keeping time had been resolutely beating against the silence. It was just the right size.

Bosky carefully ran his fingers along the hole in his chest. The flesh was amazingly smooth, nothing jagged or lumpy, no scabby skin or scar tissue, no sign of turmoil, of wounds or healing, just an absence. But when Bosky looked at his hand, he saw his fingers shook slightly, a slight chill tingling from his fingertips to his wrist. Despite how naturally the flesh sloped and smoothed at the sides to form space, there was something unfamiliar, not quite right, about its existence. He wasn't sure if putting an alarm clock in was quite right either, but it was by far the best option. As he angled the clock into the hole he felt cold metal against his skin and then nothing at all. His flesh closed up as neatly as a zipper over the alarm, seamlessly filling in and rounding outward to the regular contours of a chest. He could hear the tick-tock of the clock in his ears, but otherwise it looked alright, relatively normal, good enough. Bosky took his shower.

It wasn't until he'd played video games for an indeterminate number of hours that he noticed James hadn't returned yet. Nothing had changed outside either. Bosky thought vaguely that it should have been either darker or lighter than this, that the sun should have either risen or set. Maybe it should have been night, but there appeared to be no change between this hour and when he'd first stuck his head out the window.

Bosky shrugged and focused on the TV. He had surveyed the apartment in his search for a heart substitute, he knew that there were two gallons of milk, one half-empty, in the fridge and boxes of macaroni and cheese and cereal well-stocked in the pantry. It wasn't critical James be present. Supplies looked recently replenished, and the world was ending anyway in boring monochrome. He didn't have to constantly watch it.

There were more colors inside the screen than in the real world. There were more people, and though he had to shoot them, they all regenerated later. His avatar ran about a virtual world of buildings that took bullet holes and grenades without breaking, trees and grass that didn't burn, a sky that changed. The only concerns were the crosshairs to a target and steady aim. He could have waited like this until the world finished ending, but there was a knock at his door. The banging was deplorably loud despite the game's soundtrack, ringing through the apartment.

If would have been convenient if James was at least around to answer the door. Bosky paused his game with a curse. Through the peephole, he saw the top of someone's head, black-brown hair and the smooth edge of a forehead. It was a female, and though he mainly saw hair, there was something familiar about the stranger. He undid the bolt and chain, slowly opening the door a crack to a girl about his age, petite but softly molded, her pink lips a straight, unbending line, and her eyes round, black, and shining.

Like the glass eyes of a teddy-bear, Bosky thought. She was adorable. Cute in a way that was horribly fragile, like a kitten or a gerbil, something small and sweet, a little lost, that wordlessly longed to be picked up and cuddled and told everything was all right. Bosky wanted to shut the door in her face.

“What are you doing here?” he blurted.

“James,” she said, and her voice had a softness that frightened him. “We need to talk.”

For a moment Bosky remained standing behind the door, until he remembered that James was gone. “I’m not James,” he said. “Who are you?”

Her lips curved momentarily, whether a smile or a frown, the movement was too quick to follow, but her eyes remained wide and fixed. “Let me in,” she said, and though her voice was no louder there was command in it. “You know who I am.”

She put her hand against the door and pushed. Though she was small, or perhaps because she was small, the door opened. She brushed past him, walking into the room, the long skirt of her dress flaring. “You’re James’ girlfriend,” Bosky realized out loud.

She turned her head. “Sophie,” she said. “Use my name. And when was the last time you cleaned?”

Bosky crossed his arms. The tick-tock of his alarm clock heart was distractingly loud. “James isn’t here. You can leave if you don’t like it.”

“Okay, not-James. Who exactly are you?”

“Bosky.”

“Bosky.” She said his name as though it tasted bitter to her. “A new nickname? Short for something?”

“What if it is?” Despite resembling a stuffed-animal, she was obnoxious.

“Bosky,” she said again. “All right then, Bosky. Tell James we need to talk, and I’m not going anywhere until we do.”

“If he’s gone, how do I tell him anything?”

“Look at this place,” she said. “One bathroom, a stovetop for a kitchen, one bedroom, with one twin bed. Who are you fooling? If you’re Bosky, where do you sleep?”

“On the couch,” he said defensively. “With the games.”

“All the time?”

“Yeah.” His needs were simple. “I like video games.”

Sophie looked hard at Bosky. “What kind of guy tells someone he loves her, and then runs away? How am I supposed to believe anything from that kind of guy?”

“What?”

Her glance turned toward the window again. Her shoulders rose up as she frowned, her eyes unbelievably shiny, a luster Bosky found almost painful to look at.

“I’m sleeping in the bedroom,” she said. “So stay on the couch.”

Sophie turned, marching straight into the bedroom and slamming the door. She was irritated at him, more so than he was at her, and for no good reason. He hadn’t barged into her apartment demanding things. The quiet thickened. Bosky’s alarm clock had gone still. He thumped at his chest, hitting the side of his fist against breastbone and muscle, hoping his hand wouldn’t slip through to a hole again, but the contact was solid. A slight jangle sounded from beneath his skin. He hit his chest again and the ticking of his alarm clock resumed.

Bosky sighed and stretched in relief, glancing toward the closed bedroom door. As he turned back to his controller, he noticed for the first time that the sky had darkened. There had not been anything like a night for a long time. It could be the sun was there after all, possible that James was wrong. Bosky wasn't sure if he liked the prospect or not.

The first-person shooter wasn't the same solace. Bosky couldn't focus. His clock's usual rhythm was continually disrupted by the clacking of the machinery, the slight sounds of the alarm bells skipping and rattling inside him. Even when he gave up trying to play, he kept thinking about James' girlfriend, how rude she was and annoying, how it was at all possible that James could have fallen for someone like her. How she was the only one he'd seen since the world started ending. She was sleeping in James' room now, and he thought of how the room and bed really were tiny, how close they would have been to share the space. They would have to sleep on their sides. His hand resting in the dip and arch of her hip, the warmth of her back against him, her hair scented with lavender, the curve of her neck and the shell of her ear, the soft, firm glide of her skin under his palm, against the bristles of his cheek, the gentle pull and push of her breathing, her heartbeat a lulling, swaying cadence, a rise and fall, rise and fall.

In what might have been morning, when the sky was grey again, Bosky wasn't sure if he'd been awake or asleep, thinking or dreaming. At the kitchen table, Sophie was eating from one of his boxes of cereal. "James," she said without looking up. Her head was bent so her nose seemed to be directly over her bowl, while the pale strip of her forehead, and veil of hair, hung over the table. "I need to explain something. I really meant it when I said you have to think with your head more than your heart."

Bosky glanced at the gallon of milk by her side. He didn't know that he had enough to last until the end of the world if two people were eating cereal every morning.

"I'm not—"

"I curse too much."

"Okay."

"It's because I don't always think. Used to be that any little thing would set me off, a small tick, a mood swing, a thwarted preference, and I'd curse someone. Most times I didn't intend anything, it was just because of a moment, because of a sudden emotion that comes and goes."

"That's nice, but—"

"It didn't used to bother me. I figured some guys were oversensitive, that I was just stronger than them. They were all different people from what I thought anyway, so it wasn't a big loss if the whole relationship didn't work out. It was all temporary."

Bosky's alarm clock was starting to jostle and chirp. He didn't want her to keep talking like he was James. Her cereal was getting soggy, which would be a waste of cereal, but he couldn't find the voice to point this out to her.

"But then my first boyfriend committed suicide," she went on, and the alarm clock went quiet. "We'd been over for a long time, and that really was just a fling, but it made me think. What I used to say to him, what he said to me. It made me realize there's a strange power in words. They stay with you, even the words you wouldn't think of as cursing. They could damage someone beyond anything I could really understand. It made me feel dangerous. If I opened my mouth, I had to be sure I meant my words, that I wouldn't want to take them back. Because I can't take them back."

“It’s the same with you. If I can curse then I could be cursed, but I’m not going to just let you. So you need to think more about this, whether what you said was true, that this isn’t just a phase. Because love doesn’t come and go just like that. It stays with you, it goes everywhere with you.”

It was quiet for a long moment, Sophie still staring at her cereal bowl without eating, Bosky staring at her bent head. “I’m not James,” he finally said. “He didn’t come back last night.”

Sophie’s neck straightened. She looked straight at Bosky, her black eyes wide, no sign of anger, of joy, of anything except the animal brightness. “You don’t have to pretend to be someone else,” she said, the quiet in her voice heavy.

Bosky crossed his arms, trying to meet her direct gaze. It was harder than it had any right to be. “I’m me,” he said. “I’ve always been me.”

“And you’re Bosky?” she said.

“What if I am?”

“Tell James what I said.”

“All of it?” Bosky’s jaw slid open, too heavy to keep closed.

“Then tell me what James would say if he heard.”

“I don’t know.”

“What would he say?”

Suddenly, the alarm clock went off, shrieking through the small apartment, the bells shrill and angry. Bosky beat at his chest again, thumping several times before it finally clacked and the tick-tock tempo resumed, faster than before.

“What was that?” Sophie said.

“My alarm clock.” It was no good, Bosky thought to himself. It took hits to start his new heart, and hits to stop it, no matter what he was taking a beating.

“Your what?”

“It means time’s up,” Bosky said.

He needed to get out, anywhere, just away from Sophie. But outside there was little sense of escape. The sky was an unchanged, sunless once more, though there seemed to be enough of a general spread of light to show everything in monotonous relief. The tick-tock of his alarm clock beat in cadence with the slow march of his footsteps.

It’s all over, he thought to himself. It had to be, the world was ending. He walked out on the little dock by the sea, looking out at the thin grey line of the horizon. James had always liked watching the boats, Bosky recalled. Something about the movement of the water, lapping in and out, the sound a gentle melody. Something about the sight of boats and the promise of journeys, of coming and going. But even the water was grey and shallow, slow moving little eddies, the tide lower than Bosky had ever seen.

The wooden pillars of the dock stood completely above water. There was simply no ocean beneath them, though the barnacles that encrusted the usually submerged wood were still there, and the numerous rocks and shells that scattered and spread at the bottom, the soft, sucking mud that sloped further out. The boats moored in the vicinity leaned and rested, canoes perched neatly in the sand, and two sailboats turned over completely, their masts and sails sinking into the ground. No one claimed them or took any particular notice at all. There weren’t any seagulls waddling on the beach or screeching in the air, not even any pigeons.

Why is the world ending? Bosky wondered, jumping off the dock into the crumbling crunch of rock under his shoes, walking over it into the mud that sank under his feet, still damp, trying to get closer to the water edging the horizon, listening for the sound of it lapping and receding but hearing only the tick-tock of his alarm clock. Bosky walked further and further down over hills that had been under the water, the salt and rot smell, sightings of long, slimy fronds of seaweed, dying straggles of underwater grass, but every time it seemed he'd gotten a little closer to the waves, they receded further and further from him, the pull and push like a hand swaying a half-hearted goodbye.

He finally stopped chasing the tide when he saw the dock was a thin strip disappearing into the distance. At least when he began to walk back toward it, it grew bigger again, long, dark, wooden, and still. The water followed him back, but it wouldn't return to shore, where the ships continued to lean and sigh. It would have devastated James, who had a tendency for romantic notions. He liked the sunlight on the waves.

Like a road, Bosky remembered. There had been people who believed the ocean connected to the sky, that sailing long enough would take one to the country of the sun. It seemed so close because anyone could see it, every day, out across the water. It seemed that anyone could go. But Bosky really didn't care. There was nowhere to go but back and Bosky did, taking the mud clumped all over his shoes. When he got back on pavement, he left behind wet smears as footprints.

At the apartment there was no one inside to grate at him. Sophie must have left, gone to find James at some other location, perhaps giving up the search entirely, neither options really mattering. Bosky continued gaming. He tried to go for kill streaks in the game, trying to beat his record, mashing buttons on the controller and watching his avatar

roll and crawl, picking through specs on rifles, pistols, shotguns, machine guns. But as the avatar jumped and ran through the various environments, locked on movement, checking for anomalies in the scenery, hunting for targets, Bosky began cycling through the various game environments of the first-person shooter, going from shacks in the jungle to urban ruins, scouting each virtual battlefield. His avatar ducked and covered, running for places the enemies had not yet spawned or followed him to, rolling around and constantly tilting the view toward the sky. It seemed as though even the game was growing grey. Bosky hoped it was only eyestrain.

“Still playing?”

Bosky started. Sophie was there, right by the couch. There was a teddy bear, a ridiculously large one about half her size, in her arms.

Bosky rubbed his hand over his face. “You’re still here?”

“You don’t see the sun much these days, do you? And no beach scenes for these fights?”

“No cover.” His avatar was contained where it was until it finally fell. There had to be defenses, places to hide, to get away, to survive a little longer. No flat expanses. There was not even the hope of a chance then. That would be open execution.

Sophie sat down on the couch next to him, the teddy bear still in her arms. Bosky wasn’t sure when she’d brought that thing into the apartment, it was awfully hard to miss all things considered. With the stuffed head right under her chin, there were two sets of wide, black eyes staring at him.

“Don’t remember this?” Sophie said, glancing down at the bear. “The carnival with the water guns? The one at the pier?”

Bosky stared. At least the teddy bear didn't appear to have a mouth, but Sophie's lips were in their typical straight line. "James get that for you?"

Her lips tightened, just slightly. "Right." she said. "You really don't remember?"

"Was I there?"

She clutched the bear closer, her shoulders and body leaning forward, her head sinking deeper into the plush. A faint fragrance wafted across the small space between them, lavender.

"Sorry," Bosky said. "My memory's been really patchy since James left. I got really drunk the night before. Maybe alcohol poisoning."

"And now you're brain dead."

"Hey," Bosky sat up straighter. He wished she wasn't sitting so close beside him. "Beer can cause memory loss."

"Long-term?"

Bosky tapped his own temple. "Obviously." His avatar brought out the sniper rifle, and Bosky quickly took down a few opponents through the scope.

"And video games are the answer?"

"No, but if I'm stressed or there's nothing to do, killing everyone's kind of fun."

"What's the point?"

"The point is there is no point," he said. "The world's ending. You just kill everyone."

"Bosky."

"What?"

"Where's James?"

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s dead already. He just took off after he told me it’s all over.” Bosky knew he could say these things honestly because he had no heart. “For all I know, you killed him.”

She glared, her eyes squinting down into black sparks, her mouth pursing slightly. It was possible the expression would have been menacing on anyone else, but her face couldn’t be. Her cheeks were too round, and her mouth too soft, Bosky thought, like a squirrel. “I’m thinking about it,” she said. But Bosky had never felt threatened by a squirrel before. He could just pick her up and throw her outside, shake her around, push her over. The thought delighted him. He smiled.

“You should be careful,” she said, seeing him grin. “I really am dangerous, you know.”

Her face was inscrutable and immovable most times, but there could be minute and quick little changes, a rainbow succession, light glimmering and skipping across the contours of her brow, her cheek, her mouth. The silky stripe of her brow dipping and rising into scrunches and kinks, her eyes, wide and round now, crinkling and thinning into smiling arches, the rigid line of her lips, flexing, supple, curving and easing. She was beautiful, Bosky suddenly thought. Very beautiful.

“Why do you even care?”

“Maybe I don’t.”

“Then go.” His alarm clock started to chatter and chirp again.

Bosky kept his gaze on the big screen. He could still feel her eyes on him, larger than before.

“I was never out to curse him,” Sophie said, “but he’s not going to take me out either.”

“Then maybe it’s better he’s gone.”

Sophie was quiet. Her hold relaxed on the teddy bear and she took it off her lap and put it between herself and Bosky. “You have to find him. We can’t leave otherwise. The tide won’t come in.”

Bosky’s arms stiffened. His avatar didn’t take cover fast enough, and a bullet through the head ended his latest kill streak. Bosky watched as a new window popped up asking if he wanted to continue. He was doing terribly. “The sun’s gone too,” Bosky said. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“Bring him back.”

“Why?”

She was staring straight ahead, but it didn’t seem like her eyes were focused on the screen. “He had a way of talking. Kind of crazy.”

“And you liked that?”

“Yeah,” she said, her chin dipped lower into the stuffed animal. “Like when we first met he said I was the prettiest girl he’d ever seen. I thought he was stupid, saying such an obvious line. Then whenever I ran into him he’d keep saying horrible things, like he could pick me out of any crowd because I had a hop in my step, like a squirrel. That he could put me on his shoulder and take me everywhere because I was small enough, and we would go sailing across the seven seas like a pirate and his parrot. When he won this stupid teddy bear for me he said he had to get it because it was my twin. If I tried to get him to shut up by saying it was demeaning, all the animal comparisons, he’d say I was

the one being prejudiced by assuming cute things were beneath us. That he respected cute animals very much.” There was just the slightest hint of a curve in her lips. “He was lame.”

Bosky felt his face reddening. “Wow,” he said.

“I just wanted to figure him out. He seemed too campy to be true.”

“Was he?”

“Sort of. I mean, he was just especially lame around me, he was kind of normal otherwise. But it wasn’t like he was putting on a show either. He was good to me. And even when he talked funny, there was this lopsided truth to what he was saying. I’m short, you know? I get lost in crowds, but he really could find me. Animals liked him too; he did feed some squirrels in the park, ones that would come right up to him. He knew how to pet dogs and cats the right way so they leaned up against him, and he was always talking to the parrots at pet stores. We went out on the water a lot, down to the beach, looking at seashells, rocks, and crabs, canoeing, just walking round the docks over here...”

Sophie’s voice drifted off, and Bosky’s avatar swerved back and forth between cover just to have something to do. He couldn’t pinpoint any enemy locations. He couldn’t quite focus enough on the blots in the distance, couldn’t quite process whether they were shadows of building structures or an opponent. He kept thinking about the salt smell of the ocean as it spread wide and far, the wheel and screech of seagulls overhead, spackles of sunlight playing across the crests of the waves, glimmering like fish scales.

“He had this story,” Sophie said. “about how close the sun was. Not in terms of deep space and light years, not a star, but a location, a place, and very close.”

“A country. I know. Ancient misconception.”

“People thought if you tried hard enough, if you were brave enough, you could go there. It wasn’t even strange to them that they’d never met anyone from there.”

“They figured anyone from the sun wouldn’t want to leave it, and anyone who got there wouldn’t want to return.”

“Exactly what James said.”

“That’s what he would say. He’s a sap.” Bosky’s avatar was just running up and down stairs, going in circles. “So I take it you didn’t much like that story.”

“No, I liked it. I hated that I liked it.”

“Okay,” Bosky said. He hadn’t been shot yet, but he couldn’t seem to find anybody else either.

“He just spread the sappiness around. I kept turning that story over in my head. I began to think really stupid thoughts; like, what is a native of the sun? Would you know when you met him? Do rays pour out of his eyes or something obvious? Or maybe there’s a test you have to do, some figuring out, maybe if you scratch his skin, it’ll peel off and you’ll see golden light spill out. And would I want to go to the sun with him?”

“And get major sunburn and maybe die of exposure,” Bosky said. “There’s no cover.”

“There isn’t,” Sophie said, but she sounded sad. “You really aren’t like James.”

“We all know better now.”

“Sure. Even someone next to you can be light years away.”

The avatar crashed to the ground. A sniper from some side angle. Bosky looked at the controller in his hands, he wanted to press Continue, but hesitated.

“I hate it,” Sophie said. “I hate that I almost believe him. Because I do know better. But I can’t go anywhere until I know if he meant everything he’s said. I have to know, and you have to find him.”

She stood up and left the room, but the teddy bear stayed beside him, its arms and legs leaning limply. He didn’t watch her leave, his avatar had gotten up and was walking about. There was, it seemed, no sun in any of the game environments. Despite how well-lit the scenery was, there was nothing in the sky but either the tall spires of abandoned buildings, tall trees and leaves, clouds, or a peerlessly blue but empty space. He didn’t know why he’d started searching for the sun anyway. To survive he had to pick off enemies, if there had been a sun it might have just been a distraction. If there had been a sun Bosky didn’t even know what he would have done. Probably shoot at it, a useless action following a useless search.

Bosky listened for the sound of gunfire, watched for the reemergence of enemies, but the stillness was unusually long. His avatar unloaded a clip at a boulder to draw enemies, but there was no reaction. For a moment, Bosky wondered if he had unlocked some secret level, or perhaps completely beaten the game, but he put the thought aside. The game wasn’t designed to be won, it had to be a glitch. Besides, this didn’t feel like winning. His avatar kept wandering, lugging its weapons, its ammo, and finding nothing. Ambling about as it did, the avatar even seemed as tired and bored as Bosky was.

Putting down the controller, Bosky looked at the teddy bear beside him, its head slightly tilted toward him with glassy black eyes. Most carnivals had purposely garish stuffed animals as prizes. The teddy bear was over-sized, which fit the bill, but otherwise

was plain brown, and with no mouth under its snout, the eyes dominated, making its expression absurdly pathetic.

Bosky pulled the teddy bear to him, trying to find the mouth, whether there was some thin thread that could be construed as either a smile or a frown, or for even a neutral flat line. His arms closed about the bear's head and he squeezed it to his chest, where the alarm clock clattered like it couldn't go on much longer. Bosky didn't want to play the game.

The teddy bear squashed easily, the give strangely comforting. He felt the plush on his face and he wondered if he smelled that pungent flower scent with its bitter edge. The alarm clock jumped and jolted, trying to ring again and Bosky stood up, throwing the teddy bear back on the couch.

James shouldn't have just taken off and saddled him with Sophie. Bosky felt a small twinge of anger working through him. He paced back and forth the length of the room, hardly wider than the TV screen. Why was it taking so long for the world to end anyway? Anything—volcanoes going off, mushroom clouds in the sky, meteors raining down, tsunamis higher than skyscrapers—anything was better than this grey purgatory of quiet annoyances, than just waiting and waiting and waiting for it all to be over.

Did Sophie curse him after all? Or was it actually James? Or did he just curse himself? Bosky left the apartment running, skidding and veering down the empty streets, craning his head upwards, to the left and right, searching the sky, the same cloudless expanse, the same world as before, somber and quiet. Everything gray without sun and sea. He panted for breath, his steps slowing to a walk finally, and he stood gape-mouthed at the dry docks, staring at the far-off flutter of the tide, too weak to come closer.

Could the world end any slower than this? The alarm clock continued to sputter and shake. He thought he accepted the drawn-out death of everything, that it was fine there was nobody else, that there was no color, that there was nothing but Sophie, who didn't even want him in the first place. And James was off somewhere, perhaps floated off on the tide.

"You're a coward!" Bosky yelled out at the ocean. "The world's ending, come and face it! What're you so scared of your own girlfriend for?" There was no response from across the waves. Bosky closed his eyes. "She's not that great anyway," he muttered to himself. "She's got a major attitude, self-entitled, stuck-up, bossy, sub-zero frigid, and she doesn't ever smile."

Yes, she does, James said.

"That doesn't make up for anything."

She's not that bad, James said. She's squirrely. Kind of shy; and she's been through a lot, she doesn't bite unless she feels cornered, or scared.

"Then deal with her yourself. Talk to her about being in love and whatever."

She doesn't want to hear it. Not really.

"Then just get a new girlfriend."

You're different, Bosky. You can't fall in love.

"Who says?" Bosky spat.

She's always left if someone said he loved her.

"You told her! And she's still here."

She didn't believe me.

Bosky shook his head. "I can't do any better. We're not that different even if you want me to be."

You don't have a heart.

Bosky opened his eyes. James was nowhere in sight, and the ocean was just as far as it had always been. Bosky's hand went to his chest and his fingers sank in, closed over the round mix of plastic, metal, and glass, and gripped. He pulled the alarm clock out and it tinkled weakly in his hands, still ticking, but barely. It was dented to the sides, a cobweb crack over the clock face.

"You're useless," Bosky said to his alarm clock heart.

He pulled his arm back and threw with all his might at the horizon. The alarm clock shot, arced, and fell through the air, but suddenly the tide rushed forward and gently caught the broken timepiece, and it sank out of sight with the receding waves.

Bosky sat down at the edge of the dock, letting his feet dangle off. If the ocean was where it should be, he would have felt cold wet up to his ankles. Already he could feel the effects of having nothing beating inside him, his body was tired. His shoulder slouched forward, his elbows and forearms leaned against his thighs, and his head bowed, leaden, toward his knees.

Peripherally, he saw that the sky was darkening, a sudden darkness, and within the minute he felt cold drops of rain on the top of his head, trickling down his neck, leaving round, temporary stains on the sand under the dock. It was soaking his clothes, but he needed to do laundry anyway.

How far was the ocean? Bosky wondered. How far was the sun? A silent hole filled his chest. He felt like he could be in love.

Please don't, James said.

This is all in your head, James said.

We need to keep it that way, James said.

"James," a voice called from behind him.

"He just left," Bosky straightened his back. It was getting cold. "He's not here."

He turned his head slowly, seeing Sophie standing straight and pert.

"James," she said again. "I was looking for you. Are you all right?"

"Mainly, I feel empty inside."

"Wow," Sophie said. "Dramatic."

"No, I'm really empty inside."

She didn't immediately reply. Instead, she sat down beside Bosky, easily swinging her feet over the edge of the dock and leaning close so their shoulders almost touched. "Waiting for the tide?"

"Not really."

Her shoulder just barely bumped his, and one of her palms slid across the wood until it brushed his hand, the slight warmth of her wrist against his, the bitter scent of lavender skimming the air. "Want me to go?"

Yes, Bosky wanted to say, you're ruining everything.

"No," James said.

"But you will," Bosky said, staring straight ahead. The sea looked so far away and he dropped his eyes. "I think I love you," he said, even though there was a hole in his chest. "Really," he said. "I do."

"I believe you."

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

“It’s getting brighter,” Sophie said.

Bosky looked up in surprise. It had stopped raining, and though his clothes were still wet and chilled, the sky was no longer grey but a pure, pearly sheen, like a skin about to burst with the weight of light.

“Come on!” Sophie suddenly called, and she grabbed his hand and jumped off the dock, dragging Bosky with her. They had hardly landed before she began running, never loosening her hold on him, sinking and flailing through the sand but advancing nonetheless, until they came to the flurry of ships leaning on dry ground. “You haven’t taken me sailing for a while!” she said, pointing.

She clambered into one of the smaller boats, one resting atop a sand dune, upright and jaunty, the prow resolutely facing the open horizon. Bosky stood in the sand while Sophie looked down at him, her hand still in his. His chest ached. She was smiling, smiling, smiling.

“Where are we going?” James asked.

“Anywhere is better than here, isn’t it? We have to move on.”

“I don’t know,” Bosky said. “What happens after this?”

From the horizon, the white pearl of the sky seemed to break for a golden-red sun, hanging low over the waves. It had been so long since he’d seen it that he couldn’t remember whether he was facing east or west, whether he was seeing a sunrise or a sunset. But when he looked at Sophie, the direction didn’t seem to matter. Her small body lit and danced like a wisp of flame. Her hair flared black and red, her eyes were sunbursts, and there was no telling whether the glow came from the sun or from somewhere inside

her. Men had died because of her. This was, Bosky thought, what it meant to see a native of the sun.

He went into the boat, and already he could feel the wind blowing brisk and cool against him, hear it rushing past. “Bring the tide in,” Sophie said.

“You think we’ll make it?”

“We could burn up. We could die of exposure.”

“I don’t have a heart anymore.”

“James,” she said. “Can we try again?”

Bosky closed his eyes; he could suddenly hear the seagulls careening and keening overhead, smell the salt rush of the sea, hear its distant water roar, drawing closer and closer, hear it lap and ripple against the sides of the boat while it bobbed and rose, waving to and fro, gentle and rhythmic. He could hear and feel Sophie nestling closer until her palm settled against his chest, where the hole should have been. But it was all there, flesh, bone, and blood. As though they had never been lost. James opened his eyes. There was his heart, and there was Sophie, in the brightness of sun and sea. She leaned against his shoulder, looking forward as their boat edged toward the horizon. And the world beat.

The Way Up

By
Fonda Fan

Mr. Goodman

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM.

KEVIN LI opens his eyes to daybreak. He is twenty-years old, with fractured vertebrae in his lower back that required a lumbar fusion surgery. He is currently in the recovery stage.

Across from his bed he sees MR. TERHUNE, an elderly stroke patient who stares at the wall without blinking.

A male NURSE enters and pours some pills out into a plastic cup before handing it to Li.

NURSE
Morning.

The nurse presses a button that makes Li's hospital bed rise so Li is in a sitting position, and Li swallows his pills while the nurse puts on some rubber gloves and gets a bedpan. The bed flattens out again, and Li is rolled onto his stomach.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. VARIOUS LOCALES. MONTAGE.
As events progress, the light fades from morning to late afternoon.

Li is rolled and Velcro-strapped into a white, plastic back brace, that he wears during all active hours. He is lifted onto a wheelchair and wheeled away by the nurse.

He goes to the physical therapy room where there are several other inpatients, in their mid-fifties and older with wheelchairs, walkers, braces, and canes all around.

Li does some exercises with a therapist, including one where he walks gingerly with a walker.

He is wheeled back to his room by a physical therapist.

Li studies from a large textbook on his hospital bed. His back brace is off and on the wheelchair by the bedside. Li looks over several notes on a sliding desk.

Mr. Terhune makes a slight moan and Li stops, grabs a nurse call button by his bed and watches Terhune closely. When Terhune makes no further sound he puts the nurse call button down and resumes studying.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. LATER.
Li looks up from his book and picks up the cell phone on the sliding desk. He scrolls through his contacts list until he comes to a name. The picture associated with the contact is of a smiling girl, with her arm around Li's neck. They are both in Army uniform.

LI
Linda.

He stares at the picture a beat, then glances at Mr. Terhune, who is staring at the wall again.

LI
(To Mr. Terhune.)

Stay motivated, all right? You'll
get better, things can only go up
from here.

Footsteps sound in the hallway outside. Li puts his phone down quickly and hard on the table, so that the table slides away, taking books and phone out of arms reach. Li makes a slight attempt to grab and pull the table back when ROBERT GOODMAN enters.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. LATER.

Robert Goodman is about Li's age. He sits beside Li's hospital bed, writing in a notepad he rests on his knee. He leans heavily over the notebook. He always appears in uniform, but he always has a slight slouch at his shoulders. Most times there is something slightly untidy about his bearing, a popped collar, or his short cropped hair slightly mussed, open pockets, or a loose shoelace, wrinkles and creases, small issues that still create a slightly disheveled appearance.

Li is making his hospital bed rise and fall, rise and fall, and the noise of the machinery is loud.

GOODMAN
Anything else?

LI
And I took a massive dump.

Goodman looks up from his notepad. Li looks down at Goodman's boots and notices a loose shoelace. He points.

LI
You see that?

Goodman crouches down and quickly tucks the shoelace in. Li sees that one of Goodman's cargo pockets is open so that he can see the buttons.

LI
And that.

GOODMAN
I keep my notes there so—

The nurse passes right outside the open door and Li waves.

LI
Could I get that?
(To Goodman)
Doesn't look smart. You want to
look smart, right?

As the nurse approaches, Li points toward the rolling table at the foot of his bed, and the textbook and notes on top of it.

GOODMAN

What?

LI

Oh yeah, I took a dump yesterday
too.

The nurse pushes the rolling table to Li and he grabs the textbook.

GOODMAN

Oh. I could've—

LI

Got it.

GOODMAN

No, but really, if you need
anything, any help, I can—

LI

I got it. Button your pockets or
something.

A pause. Goodman flips through several pages of the notebook as he talks.

GOODMAN

You're doing good? Trying to get
out of here? The doctor says you
plan on going back to school.

LI

I don't want to fail, do I?

GOODMAN

Well... he must have told you that
if you fall again, you could be
permanently--

LI

Yes, he did.

GOODMAN

Then your release will be delayed.
Berkeley's hilly.

LI
Yeah.

GOODMAN
You're sure? What'd your parents
say? I bet they want you to go home
for now, just take it easy. I
would, if I were you. You ask them
about this? You talk to anyone
about this?

Goodman glances at Li's phone.

GOODMAN
I'm serious, if anything happens, I
don't know if ROTC will—

LI
Not your problem.

GOODMAN
It's someone's.

Goodman jots something down quickly and snaps his notebook shut. He puts it in his open cargo pocket, and with a look at Li, buttons and straightens it.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. NIGHT.

The lights are dimmed, and Li reads from an open textbook on his bed, taking a few notes now and then. His cell phone rings. The picture of Li and the girl flashes. Li glances at it and starts.

The phone rings a few more times, and Li looks around the room, and finally at Mr. Terhune.

LI
What should I--?

Li answers the phone.

LI
Hey. Hi, hi, Linda. Long time no--
how are you? What, me? I'm... I'm
all right, not too much-- what? Who

told you that?

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. NEXT DAY.

Li is reading and taking notes. On the edge of the sliding table is a tray of hospital food, untouched. He stiffens when he hears laughter, a girl's, down the hall. He looks all around but cannot move in the hospital bed well, so he goes back to his textbook notes and writes furiously as the laughter gets closer.

LINDA YANG enters. She is the same girl in the picture, but not in uniform. Her dress is casual, her hair down, but she carries herself with good posture and squared shoulders, a natural form of military bearing.

Li struggles to sit a little straighter as she comes in, but does not look up at her.

YANG

You know they think I'm your
girlfriend up front?

Li continues to write.

LI

You actually came.

YANG

From everybody at the unit.

She hands Li a small get-well card, which Li opens and reads.

LI

Wow. You all thought of me. That's
nice. That's really nice.

He puts the card on the sliding table, under his textbook and starts taking notes again. Linda rolls her eyes.

YANG

What's all this?

LI

Make-up.

YANG

Oh. Hope I'm not interrupting.

LI

What are you doing here?

YANG
Had to deliver the card.

LI
Why you?

Li stops writing and looks at Linda. A pause.

LI
When we got back, you made things
pretty clear.

YANG
Yeah, maybe. And maybe now's a good
time to let some things go.

LI
Really.

YANG
Yes.

LI
Really?

YANG
Do we have to? I'm checking on you,
heard you had a nasty fall, wanted
to know how you were, so how are
you doing?

LI
You're letting things go? You?

Mr. Terhune moans and Linda looks at him and then at Kevin.

LI
Mr. Terhune? He does that
sometimes. He's... not all there.
Probably.

YANG
Probably? Is he getting better?

Linda examines Li's food tray, which is some dried meat and mashed potatoes, with a jello cup.

LI

Not that I've noticed...

(A beat.)

But he can get better. He's a little stuck right now, but he can.

Linda sits next to Li's bed, takes a fork and pokes at some mashed potatoes.

YANG

Hungry? Mmmm!

LI

If I knew you were coming, I'd have ordered Chinese.

YANG

I said I'd come.

(A beat.)

I did, I'm here.

LI

Yeah. Right. Okay, Linda, get me some Chinese food.

YANG

Dream big, don't you?

She leans in uncomfortably close, causing Li to pull back slightly. She moves the fork toward his mouth, as though she'll spoon-feed him.

YANG

Say "Aaaah!"

Linda puts the fork in her own mouth.

LI

What the hell?

YANG

(Chewing.)

Well... beats starving, I guess.

Li grabs the fork from her hand.

LI
Why do you act like that?

YANG
What?

LI
Like--like that. Like... cute.

YANG
Cute? That what you thought? Not something more like "easy?"

LI
You're not checking on me, you're out for torture.

YANG
Yeah. Go ahead, roll on the floor and flop a bit. That's what I want you to do.

LI
Fair enough.

YANG
That was a joke.

A pause.

LI
Look, CID asked a lot of questions. Very specific, and I—

YANG
Drop it.

LI
It was an official investigation. They were saying that-- there were rules. I was stuck, had to answer them.

YANG
You're not dropping it.

LI
I'm not out for some pity-thing.

YANG
Neither am I.

LI
If I can make it up to you—

YANG
Who said you could?

LI
Not this minute, but...

YANG
No. Some things you don't forget.
So you going to eat?

Li puts the fork back in the tray.

There is the sound of voices down the hall, Robert Goodman chatting with one of the nurses.

LI
(Mutters.)
Him again.

YANG
ROTC?

LI
Goodman.
(Pause.)
The guy up top.

YANG
Oh... Do you blame him?

LI
No...

YANG
It's nice he visits.

LI

Yeah, great. He's cadet commander,
he could delegate. Someone else.

Li sees that Yang is staring at him.

LI

I don't blame him. I don't. It's
not his fault, nobody knew what
would happen. I don't even really
know how I fell. But that doesn't
mean he has to keep coming here,
and ask twenty questions about my
daily progress. And writing it all
down.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. HALLWAY.
Goodman is jotting down something the nurse is saying.

GOODMAN

What was that last part?

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. later.
The footsteps come closer and Yang rises from her seat inside Li's room.

LI

No, don't.

Goodman enters. His collar is slightly ruffled, and another shoelace is loose.

GOODMAN

Afternoon, CDT Li. How are--
(Notices Linda and starts.)
Afternoon! Visitors! I wasn't—

YANG

Hi, SGT Yang. Or Linda.

LI

What's with your shoelaces? Again?

Goodman bends down and quickly tucks it in before glancing at Linda.

GOODMAN

Ms. Yang. Li's girlfriend?

YANG

We're just in the same unit.

Linda frowns at Mr. Goodman.

LI

We were deployed together. Collar.

Goodman straightens the collar as he talks.

GOODMAN

You were? Iraq?

YANG

Where else?

GOODMAN

Ah, of course, there's a lot of
movement in that theater. A lot of
action.

LI

Some people saw action all right.

He glances at Linda and then quickly away, but Linda catches the look.

YANG

A lot of people didn't.

GOODMAN

I hope nothing too serious
happened?

YANG

We were just paper pushers. Data,
supplies, tracking, that kind of
stuff.

GOODMAN

So everything went all right?

LI

We sat there pushing paper. It was
kind of useless.

GOODMAN

No, I'm sure it wasn't. You were
all part of a bigger effort,
sacrificing for your country. You

both probably did a lot more than you know. You were part of the operation to liberate Iraq, you were helping the Iraqis.

LI

You know we were doing all that, SGT Yang?

GOODMAN

I mean, it can't have been easy. It's pretty dangerous, even on a base?

YANG

Well... sure. There's danger everywhere.

LI

Especially in a combat zone. So there was some flak, not always from hostiles.

YANG

Friendly fire's not so friendly.

GOODMAN

Oh... uhm...

LI

Reports first, right?

Li motions at Goodman's notebook and Goodman starts to leaf through it.

Kevin starts to play with raising the bed up and down, generating an annoying whine throughout the conversation.

GOODMAN

I'm sorry, Ms. Yang, I just have to...

YANG

It's fine.

LI

Do your job. Do your duty.

Goodman notices the textbooks and an empty water cup on the rolling table.

GOODMAN
Refill?

LI
Not thirsty.

Linda walks over to the side of the room, and looks at Mr. Terhune, who stares ahead without blinking.

GOODMAN
I'm afraid I have to reopen a
previous discussion.

LI
Reopen.

GOODMAN
You know you'll have to stay an
extra month in rehab? To go back to
school? Which still isn't
recommended by any—

LI
Yes!

GOODMAN
How will you get around? You'll
need extra resources, adaptations
to your new situation. From where?

LI
I'll figure it out.

GOODMAN
You need to heal properly, CDT Li,
or you risk further injury. There's
a way to go about it and you're
not—

Li lowers the bed so that he's completely prone and glares at Goodman, who stops talking for a beat.

LI

Let's say we did this your way,
went about it "properly." I
withdraw from school—

GOODMAN

Yes!

LI

And went home.

GOODMAN

Yes, good, okay. Go on.

LI

So what's that mean? Going home, I
couldn't finish my first semester
in school properly. I couldn't pass
one class properly. I couldn't
complete ROTC properly. Couldn't be
a hoo-ah soldier, properly. Hey, I
couldn't climb a goddamn rope net
properly. I continue this chain
reaction, get locked into some
pattern for life. Couldn't get
anything done properly. But I'm not
getting stuck like that. Not again.
It's not going to just be me, myself,
and I, some unholy trinity anymore,
I'm getting better, and I'm not staying here.
Do you get it?

GOODMAN

No.

Li raises the bed again so that he's sitting up and addresses Linda.

LI

Liberating Iraq. He doesn't piss
you off? Just a little?

YANG

Kevin.

GOODMAN

I'm obligated to inform you of your
options and risks. All right then.

Goodman stands up and shuts his notebook. He glances at Linda and nods at her.

GOODMAN

Nice to see you, Ms. Yang. Didn't mean to take your time.

YANG

Don't worry.

LI

Yeah, it's completely okay. It's all good.

YANG

I'm sorry...

GOODMAN

Uh, no. I understand that the morphine can be—

LI

It's Vicodin now. Check your reports.

Goodman exits. Yang crosses her arms.

YANG

Don't blame him? Who has trouble letting go?

Li motions at himself.

LI

I have no trouble with that.

YANG

He has a point. About going home. I don't get how taking a break means you failed at anything.

LI

This isn't about taking a break. I don't need a break. No matter what I do, it's not going back to the way it was. There's no point in

waiting for everything to be okay,
go back to normal, because that
won't happen, that isn't how this
works.

YANG

So because you can't be 100% you're
trying to get worse? Genius!

LI

I can avoid hills, okay? Stay in
the chair, it's not impossible.
Maybe I'll need help sometimes
but...

YANG

How much help exactly? What if you
can't get any?

LI

It's looking that way.

YANG

With what a joy you are, I guess
so. You have a thing for bad calls,
don't you?

LI

Not the only one.

A beat. Linda slowly turns toward Kevin.

YANG

You can finally say what you think.
To my face.

LI

No, that's not-- I made a mistake
before, okay? I just assumed-- It's
not like I don't want to do things
properly. I can't. It doesn't work
out right.

YANG

You used to be very proper from
what I remember.

LI

It was CID! The Criminal Investigation Department! And you were with him before, and a lot of other guys too, and they asked about it, so-- I just assumed you two were... I should have been watching a little closer, all right? Been alert, seen something was off. But I just assumed instead. I shouldn't have.

YANG

No, why not? It comes down to the physical evidence, and there wasn't enough. "He said, she said." Can't get anywhere with that. Made me look like a liar, didn't it? Didn't fight enough, must have wanted it.

LI

Stop that.

YANG

What? It's not like I don't get that logic. It's over, case closed. CID made a decision, they interviewed whoever else, had their investigation. It's done.

LI

You're not really over it, are you?
You don't have to—

YANG

No. You didn't do anything to me. You didn't do anything. You got your card. Enjoy those mashed potatoes.

Linda exits.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT.

Yang walks out across the lot when she notices Goodman leaning against his car with his head tilted up and his eyes closed. Linda Yang hesitates but then starts moving toward him. Goodman opens his eyes and sees her.

GOODMAN

Ms. Yang, where do you live again?

YANG

Was this what you meant by letting me handle it?

GOODMAN

I had to finish the reports. You didn't say when you'd come.

YANG

Neither did you.

Goodman holds up his notebook.

GOODMAN

ROTC won't be liable for anything that may happen. If he wants the program to cover any further damages—

YANG

You think he'll sue?

GOODMAN

Not... necessarily. But the battalion commander asked me to feel things out, be familiarized with his mental condition, his general progress.

YANG

Building a case.

GOODMAN

No, it's not like that. Not like that at all. ROTC really isn't liable, all the proper protocols were followed. But if he makes things complicated... command just wants to see how things stand. Everyone wants him to get better, and he needs to take care of himself. We just have to watch

ourselves too.

YANG

That's fine. Cover all the angles,
he'd get that. He's a stubborn ass,
but he'd get that.

GOODMAN

He's going back to school.
(Pause.)
Back! In his condition!

YANG

So?

GOODMAN

Nobody can figure why he wants to
push it like that. It's like he
wants something to go wrong.

YANG

Yeah. An ass.

GOODMAN

Maybe next time you could—

YANG

I'm out. It's on him.

GOODMAN

That's it? You're okay with this?

YANG

I'm not his girlfriend!

GOODMAN

He could be permanently disabled,
paraplegic, he's lucky he isn't
already!

YANG

Why's this such a big deal? You've
got nothing to do with it.

GOODMAN

I--!

Goodman waves his notebook and then puts it away. He paces back and forth very quickly before walking away from Linda, his shoelace loose again and flopping about.

YANG

Hey, what about that ride?

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. VARIOUS LOCATIONS. A FEW DAYS LATER. MONTAGE.

Li wakes up and sees Mr. Terhune across from him. The nurse comes in with pills and rubber gloves.

At physical therapy Li tries to go further with the walker than the therapist wants, and has to be convinced to go back to his wheelchair.

Back in his room he continues to study sitting in his wheelchair with various textbooks and papers steadily filling his bed as the light fades. He looks up during one session and looks at Mr. Terhune, who seems to be staring back at him. Li goes back to studying.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. NEXT DAY.

The hall echoes with footfalls, and the nurse pokes his head in.

NURSE

Ready to go?

INT. PHYSICAL THERAPY ROOM.

Several inpatients are gathered on two sides of a volleyball net. Most of them are seated in their wheelchairs. A few, including Kevin Li, are standing with a walker in front of them and a wheelchair right behind them. Even fewer have just walkers.

Physical therapists stand to the side and among the inpatients. A balloon is being lightly tapped from one side of the net to the other. Kevin watches the balloon, then looks at Mr. Terhune who is at the far corner of the room unmoving while a physical therapist talks to him.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT.

Robert Goodman pulls up in his car and parks. He steps out of the driver's side, and Linda Yang comes out the passenger side. Goodman looks at her, and she starts toward the hospital but then turns back toward the car.

GOODMAN

Please! He'll listen to you.

YANG

And you'll just wait here?

GOODMAN

Take your time.

She starts again toward the hospital and then comes back.

YANG

You owe me. You owe me big time.

GOODMAN

That's fine, lunch, dinner,
whatever, I'll treat.

YANG

For how long?

GOODMAN

How long? That's-- is your
boyfriend all right with that?

YANG

He's not!

GOODMAN

But don't you-- wait, you're not
seeing anyone?

Yang bristles.

YANG

What did Kevin say about me?

GOODMAN

Nothing.

YANG

Ever? You're real quick to put us
together.

GOODMAN

When he fell we had to go through
his phone. Just to get his contacts
fast--his parents, roommates. His
unit information was there too, and
you. There was a picture of the
both of you, and so...

Yang looks away. A beat.

GOODMAN
You're really not seeing anyone?

YANG
You a sinophile? You like China?

GOODMAN
No, I mean, I didn't think you'd be
single. Are you?

Yang holds out her hand.

YANG
Keys.

GOODMAN
What?

YANG
You see Kevin first.

GOODMAN
I don't know if that's—

YANG
I'll go when I'm ready.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT. LATER.

Goodman walks away from his car toward the hospital. He looks back and sees Linda sitting in the driver's seat. She honks the horn and motions at the hospital doors.

Robert shakes his head and goes in.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE THERAPY. LATER.

Robert Goodman chats with a nurse. They can both easily look in the doorway and see the balloon volleyball game.

NURSE
Just back from Iraq, not hurt at
all. And then this.

Goodman writes in his notebook.

INT. PHYSICAL THERAPY ROOM. LATER.

Kevin glances backward at the hallway and frowns. The balloon glides toward him and he hits it so that it bounces off the chest of a white-haired old lady across the net. She gasps in surprise.

A physical therapist at the side comes forward and picks the balloon up after patting the old lady on the shoulder.

THERAPIST
Not bad, Kevin, but...

LI
(To old lady.)
Sorry, sorry...

The balloon is tossed at him and he taps it softly to the same old lady who catches it. Kevin glances at Mr. Terhune who is still unmoving.

THERAPIST
All right, nice job everyone, now
let's wrap it up. Almost lunchtime!

Other physical therapists and a few nurses start gathering equipment, escorting patients to their wheelchairs or walkers, and helping patients back to their rooms.

Goodman enters and the physical therapist goes to his side. She takes the balloon and taps it to Li, who catches it.

THERAPIST
He's the best player.

She waves Goodman closer to Li, and then goes to help with cleanup.

GOODMAN
Looking good.

Li notices that Goodman's shoelace is loose again, and his collar popped. He sighs but does not say anything.

Instead, Li slaps the balloon at Goodman, and it hits him in the face and bounces off. A beat.

LI
I could go pro.

The old lady from the game wheels over to Li and Goodman.

LI
(To old lady.)
I'm sorry! Again.

The old lady smiles and shakes her head, then looks at Goodman, who, as usual, is in uniform. When she talks, she speaks very loudly and slowly because she's hard of hearing.

OLD LADY
Are you in the Army too?

GOODMAN
Yes, ma'am.

LI
He's ROTC.

OLD LADY
My husband was in the Army.

LI
That's not the Army.

GOODMAN
I commission in June.

OLD LADY
All his best friends were in the
Army.

LI
He's not—

The old lady pats Kevin's hand, oblivious.

OLD LADY
(To Goodman.)
It's so nice you visit Kevin. He's
such a sweetheart and you're a dear
to come all this way. It's very
good he has friends like you.

Li and Goodman exchange glances while the old lady beams.

INT. HALLWAY OUTSIDE THERAPY. LATER.

Kevin is wheeled into the hall by the therapist, who then goes back toward the therapy room. Goodman moves to take over pushing the wheelchair, but Kevin wheels away himself.

Goodman follows.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. LI'S ROOM. LATER.

Li continually wheels around and moves papers and books noisily while Robert scribbles in his notepad. Every now and then, Goodman also looks toward the door for Linda.

GOODMAN

So the hospital's ordered you an extra walker, and a wheelchair for when you're out. You're really going back to Berkeley. Your roommate's going to take care of you or something? Are they able to?

Li piles all his work onto the sliding table and puts himself by the buttons on the bed. Since Li is not in the bed he can make it go all the way up and then all the way down.

GOODMAN

Do you mind? This is the final report.

LI

The final report?

GOODMAN

The commander wants the sitrep in.

LI

Should I sign and date?

GOODMAN

There's no need. Would you please?

Li stops pushing the buttons for the bed. He looks at Goodman's nametape.

LI

LTC must appreciate your commitment to your work, Mr. Goodman. Goodman. Good man. That what you are?

GOODMAN

I don't know.

LI
Must be hard, living up to that
name.

Li starts pulling at the Velcro straps on his back brace and it makes a loud ripping sound before he pats it down to pull it again.

GOODMAN
I try.

LI
I know I couldn't do it.

Goodman snaps his notepad shut.

GOODMAN
I'm trying to help you out here.

LI
Did you just say that? Mr. Terhune!
Did you hear that?

He looks at Mr. Terhune, who is in his usual near comatose position.

LI
With that little notebook? What,
are you writing an advice column
for me?

GOODMAN
It's a sitrep. I'm writing about
your situation.

LI
And what's that?

The velcro sounds especially loud. Goodman grimaces.

GOODMAN
Will you stop?

LI
Gotta adjust the back brace, keep
it tight. Keep my posture.

GOODMAN
You need help. You need-- you need

counseling or something.

LI

I'm good.

GOODMAN

No, you need help.

Goodman walks toward Li's wheelchair and tries to grab the handles but Li puts the brake on, so that Robert can't push it away. Their conversation gets louder and louder as Goodman tries to figure out how to push the wheelchair.

LI

The hell--?

GOODMAN

I'll take you to the nurse, have them adjust this brace. Obviously, you're having trouble!

Kevin looks at the notebook still in Goodman's hand.

LI

Don't push me.

GOODMAN

I didn't! It was an accident!
Training accident! You're in the
Army, you know that happens! I
didn't do anything to—

Li reaches round and tears the notebook from Goodman as he talks. Li starts flipping through it, randomly tearing out pages.

Li reads excerpts from some of the notes as Goodman struggles to grab the notebook back without in any way touching Li. With the bulk of the wheelchair, and Li starting to swerve it back and forth to block Goodman intermittently, the retrieval is slow going.

LI

"MRI and CT scans show fracture of
lower vertebrae, nerve damage
is--!" What, are you just copying
the doctor's notes? "Prognosis--
lamin... laminect--" I can't even
say it!

GOODMAN

Give that--!

Li starts to throw some of the pages he's tearing into the air.

LI

Hey, about my head! "Doctors tested
for cognitive and reasoning
abilities! Mental faculties appear
sound! Memory is superb!" Superb! I
remember like an elephant!

Goodman goes between trying to get the pages back and trying to get the entire notebook.

LI

The reports! The reports! You'll
have to type now!

GOODMAN

You're crazy! You need a psych
eval!

LI

The doc's prognosis is-- the kevlar
saved my mental faculties!

The nurse rushes in with Linda Yang beside him. Notebook paper is everywhere while Goodman is still simultaneously attempting to grab the handles of the wheelchair and reach for what's left of his notebook. Everything stops for a beat.

Linda holds up a bag of Chinese take-out.

YANG

Found Chinese.

NURSE

Calm down.

GOODMAN

Sorry, sir.

YANG

You're both eating hospital food if
you keep this up.

NURSE

Right.

Goodman straightens, and Li throws the notebook at Goodman.

NURSE

I know you guys are old buddies,
and you can do this when Kevin's
released, but not so rough. And we
have other patients here.

He points at Mr. Terhune, who appears unchanged despite all that he's witnessed.

NURSE

Don't disturb them.

LI

Mr. Terhune, we're so sorry. I
can't stop apologizing.

NURSE

You're having too much fun.

GOODMAN

Fun! Fun?

NURSE

Just keep it down, and don't leave
a mess.

The nurse exits. Linda starts opening food, and laying out utensils.

YANG

I got enough, I think, for all of
us.

LI

God, you all really think we're
battle buddies? And you-- why'd you
even come back?

YANG

Good question.

Goodman starts to pick up the other sheets of notepaper scattered about.

LI

You good then? Got those reports?

We're done, right?

GOODMAN

There was an investigation, you
know.

LI

Really? When was JAG here? Or was
it the MPs? CID? Who talked to me?

GOODMAN

It was a situation analysis. Cut
and dry, very clear. There was no
need to make a formal case of it.

LI

So this was completely in-house?
And seriously, nobody interviewed
me? You hear that, Linda? They did
an investigation.

YANG

Makes sense, I guess.

GOODMAN

It was an accident. An accident. As
in—

LI

Nobody was at fault. Great, that's
great, but we already knew that. So
there's no need to have this
conversation, right?

GOODMAN

You need, maybe, you need a
psychologist.

YANG

I know a couple.

LI

You taking his side?

YANG

All I did was bring food.

She starts handing out cartons of food, first to Li, then to Goodman. Li glares as Goodman takes his portion. Linda starts eating, but Li and Goodman do not. A beat. Goodman puts his food down and stands up.

GOODMAN
I'm all right, Ms. Yang.

YANG
Are you sure? You're not hungry.

LI
Yeah, you sure?

GOODMAN
I'm done here.

Goodman walks to the doorway and pauses there for a long moment, shifting from one foot to the other. He looks at Linda who looks back for a moment. Li also stares at both of them.

LI
You have to go?

GOODMAN
Uhm...

Yang starts digging in her pockets.

YANG
That's right! Hold on, Robert.

Yang takes out the car keys. Li looks from Linda to Goodman.

LI
Robert? Who calls him Robert?
You're that close already?

YANG
Somebody told us about you.

GOODMAN
I did ask her to come. On behalf of
your unit.

Li shakes his head.

LI

Wow, Linda, you get around fast.

YANG

Shut up.

LI

I'm just saying, you run around with guys and it's easy to think—

YANG

Shut up, Kevin.

GOODMAN

I don't think Ms. Yang and I are seeing each other. I mean, we aren't.

(Glancing at Linda.)

Right?

YANG

Oh boy.

LI

I didn't help you enough with your case, now you want to work against me? You're helping him out now? The guy who watched me fall?

GOODMAN

I didn't do anything wrong.

LI

Right. Right. I agree.

GOODMAN

You were climbing faster than any other cadet. I didn't think there'd be a problem.

LI

Yeah. It's all on me. So where were you looking?

YANG

Kevin!

LI

Nobody did anything wrong.

GOODMAN

I didn't! You want another investigation? Something official?

LI

What, it wasn't done properly the first time?

GOODMAN

If you believe ROTC was responsible, was negligent in any—

LI

You want to talk liability, the law? It's all about discretion. You can't just be talking to me about this. I could sue.

A beat.

GOODMAN

I know.

LI

Then watch it, some things, you can't even mention. You know, you can't even call someone a murderer or a rapist until they're convicted? They're a suspect, just a suspect, until it's proven otherwise. You shoot your mouth off and say what you think, it could hurt you later, hurt someone else.

Goodman laughs shortly.

GOODMAN

You think I'm that bad?

LI

Get an official investigation, see how you like that mix. People

poking around with badges, asking questions, writing it all down for some report you won't see. All these experts, and they'll tell you not to talk about this, don't say anything, do what we tell you. And they're right, a wrong move, and the case they're building--done for. And they tell you, don't talk to the victim, can't talk to the suspect.

GOODMAN

What are you—

LI

But you know them. You know both of them. And now one of them isn't anything like what you thought.

GOODMAN

What do you want me to say? "I'm sorry?" Does I'm sorry cut it?

LI

What's that going to matter? Once you start getting all those questions, once you start hearing all these theories, these things that might be facts. You start wondering if the questions are leading somewhere, because they sound like CID's already got it figured out.

Linda Yang starts at the mention of CID. She starts to pace, getting more and more restless as Li talks.

LI

You're not really supposed to know, but they don't sound like questions to you anymore, it sounds like they know who's lying. They act like you should know too, but which one is it? So you take a guess.

YANG
Kevin?

LI

And that's how you answer the questions. You say what you think they want to hear, what they've been grasping at anyway. You give them enough for new questions they can ask other people, you give them new facts that only you could have known really.

YANG
Kevin, stop.

LI

You're in the middle of an official investigation, you have to go along, right? Do things properly, all of us have to do things properly. And there's still a victim and a suspect, and one can tell, just by what facts you give, that actually, you helped build a case against her.

GOODMAN
Her? Wait, what are you talking about?

Both boys glance at Linda, who turns away.

LI

You do what you're supposed to do, what all the experts say, and so what? You're still wrong.

Li is looking at Linda and not at Goodman.

LI

What do you think, Linda? How does "I'm sorry" sound?

YANG
It's all talk. But you're good at

that. It's always been just talk.

LI
It's not.

YANG
Then where's the proof? Why don't
you just forget it?

LI
You don't mean that. I know,
exactly, especially now.

Linda pitches her food in the garbage can.

YANG
I knew this was a bad idea. I knew
it. You like screwing around,
Kevin? Now nobody wants to eat.

LI
Maybe this is it then. I really
don't get any better than this.

GOODMAN
Yes, you can. But you have to rest,
properly!

LI
Properly?

GOODMAN
You're not that bad off! You're
not!

Mr. Terhune makes a slight moan.

LI
That's right. I'm balloon
volleyball pro.

GOODMAN
It's not like you're crippled!
Like—

Goodman gestures toward Mr. Terhune, whose chest is rising and falling as he breathes faster than usual.

LI

Don't say that about him! You know
Terhune? You know anything? He can
get better!

Mr. Terhune moans again and his breathing is loud as well as rapid.

LI

Mr. Terhune?

Mr. Terhune starts to make a choking sound and quiver.

LI

Damnit! Hey, nurse!

He wheels to the side of the wall and starts pushing the nurse call button. The food in his lap gets tossed onto the ground.

YANG

I'll go!

She runs out into the hall to find a nurse. Mr. Terhune starts retching, and Li starts wheeling toward him when Goodman grabs Li's wheelchair's handlebars.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. HALLWAY. CONTINUOUS.

Goodman pushes him out of the room and into the hall. Li starts and turns the wheels as well.

LI

I got it!

GOODMAN

I should've grabbed you, that's
what you think, isn't it?

LI

No, I don't.

GOODMAN

You're not the only one.

EXT. HOSPITAL COURTYARD. LATER.

Li sits in a wheelchair near various hedges. Goodman sits on a bench to the side.

LI

You know, it's just that you're trapped. In a country, a city, some building, a room, it doesn't matter, you just can't get out. With yourself. Just, landlocked by your own body. Whatever it is you want to say, to do, you can't. You just can't. Sometimes... I hope he is brain-damaged. Just so he doesn't know what's happened to him. That's messed up, ain't it?

Robert takes out his notepad. It is crumpled and torn up and he makes an attempt to lay pages back inside, to smooth and straighten it. As he tries, he notices his shoelace is nearly completely undone. He ties and tucks it in.

LI

It's going to be awhile. To clean up. You got your report, right? You don't have to be here. You don't. You did your job. And it's not your fault. You can write that down, if you want.

GOODMAN

You won't go home?

Li laughs.

From the side, Linda enters with more food, but she stops short of revealing herself, and listens instead.

LI

You think going home is the only way to get better? You want to tell me my limit, tell me this is it? I don't care. I don't care, I don't care even if you're right. I can't keep lying down anymore, even if it's not the proper way, even if I fail a hundred million times just looking for one way up. I need to find it. Just once, I need to figure it out for myself.

GOODMAN
A hundred million?

LI
Just... just let me keep trying.
That's how you can help. Just let
me.

A pause. Goodman puts his notebook away.

GOODMAN
But I still should've grabbed you.

LI
No. You should't have. You probably
would've fallen too, landed on me
maybe, smashed me up even worse.
Maybe I'd be dead, maybe you too.
Then we'd both be—

GOODMAN
Does that make this any better?

LI
No. No matter how things turn out
from here, they're not right
anymore. But... really it's not
your fault. Okay? I know I'm wrong,
all right?

GOODMAN
You're not wrong.

Linda steps forward.

YANG
Make sure to actually eat this
time. And keep it down, please.

GOODMAN
I should get going.

Linda hands him a carton.

GOODMAN
Thank you, Ms. Yang.

Goodman leaves.

LI

Linda, hey. You came back. I
thought—

YANG

Stop.

LI

But you—

YANG

I don't want you to make it up. You
can't make it up. It's not enough.
I don't know what's enough.

LI

Then what—

YANG

Shut up. Just get better, whatever
that means.

She hands Li a carton of food and he slowly opens it up.

Yang sits down and takes a bite from the same carton before holding the fork out to Li as though pretending to spoon-feed him again.

Li puts his hand over hers, and smiles.

EXT. HOSPITAL PARKING LOT. LATER.

Yang walks out into the parking lot where Goodman is leaning against his car and eating.

YANG

I knew it!

Goodman swallows quickly.

GOODMAN

Tell CDT Li that when he knows his
release date, pass it on to
me. Whatever he needs to get
around campus, to get home and
back, I'll make it happen somehow.

YANG

I thought ROTC wasn't liable.

GOODMAN

It's on me. But I'll find a
volunteer to help Li out. It'll be
another cadet.

Yang comes close, and straightens Goodman's collar for him.

YANG

You're fine.

GOODMAN

He hates it when I'm here.

Yang leans against Goodman's car as well.

YANG

But he appreciates it.

INT. REHABILITATION HOSPITAL. TWO WEEKS LATER. DAY.

Li slowly rises from his wheelchair to a walker while the nurse packs the textbooks and notes.

LI

(To the nurse.)

Thanks.

The nurse nods and puts all the schoolwork in a bag and then onto the seat of the wheelchair and wheels out of the room. Li goes with the walker over to Mr. Terhune's bedside.

LI

Later, Mr. Terhune.

Li rests his hand over Mr. Terhune's and smiles, and though there is no reaction, it seems Mr. Terhune looks back at Li.

The nurse enters again and waits by the doorway.

LI

You can only go up from here, all
right? Just keep at it.

In the hallway Linda can be heard laughing.

YANG

Kevin, you ready yet? Hurry up!

Kevin Li walks out of the room with the nurse beside him.

Painted Skin

She has come again, a rare occurrence but one I always note, walking gingerly through the market, shoulders to her ears, hunched and uncertain. She is no beauty by any means, her chin pointed, the already thin slits of her eyes squinted, her dusty black hair tightly bound in a bun that still leaves stiff tendrils, coarse strands, pasted across a broad forehead, flat cheeks. This woman is simply another labor-bent, backwoods peasant, no stranger to sweat and trial, no newcomer to suffering.

I stare from the dung heap, reeking of fish guts and rotten vegetables, watching her pick her way from vendor to vendor, selling the kindling she carries on her back. Perhaps she is a carpenter's wife, helping her husband make the coin needed to buy a few necessary wares. Today she goes straight to a stall showcasing hemp and silk side by side, and despite her lack of means, points to a roll of colored silk. The cloth merchant cheats all, and today is nothing different for him. She never haggles. He looks at the coins in her open purse and cuts a bare sliver, hardly even a ribbon. She knows what he does. He knows she knows. But she simply looks down, lips pursed, brow wrinkled, before she meets his price.

And I, enthralled by the mundane, methodical, banality of little depravities, sit unmoving in the dump. The triviality staggers me: the ritual, unstinting, and shameless human corruption. It is too large to touch, too small to bother with. I need help to stir myself, to exert energy on a thing not worth the effort, but there are moments when even I cannot stay inert. Besides I never stay in one dump long, it is time to move on. So I mirror the cloth merchant's half-smile and point my finger at him, bellowing laughter from the top of the compost, announcing his uneven measurements, his crooked scales,

his daily duplicity, and to no avail. The cloth merchant's nostrils flare but he keeps his focus forward, and the wood-bearing wife glances away from me so I catch only the crinkle and flash of her eyes.

I am immortal, luminous, renowned, and ignored. I keep my exalted name to myself, but common mortals speak of me without knowing I am there. All they see is a monk, devoutly celibate, poor, and itinerant, a pleasantly plump beggar with long earlobes, and they pass in the street with their nostrils pinched and their eyes averted.

But search the highest mountains, scour the deepest rivers, hunt through the thickest forests and driest deserts, plumb the darkest caves, lowest valleys, and still you will find no immortal as great as I in all of China. I have abilities unrivaled and unimaginable. Cloud-walking? Yes, I can, twenty-thousand leagues in one bound; I trip and fall on the road only to find myself at the Jade Emperor's knees. Exorcism? No matter what circle of hell the ghoul hails from, no matter its fangs and claws or smoky eyes. Be it ghost or monkey-spirit, it will be driven out. I have numerically surpassed the seventy-two transformations into all things animate and inanimate, I have tea with dragon-kings at their behest, fairies come to offer the elixir of immortality though I am past the need, and Great Sages ask my advice. I can even raise the dead.

But to get a fair market price, to appeal to the shame or conscience of a mortal man, somehow I am dumbfounded. The effort of transformation, thunder and lightning, divine intercession, appears useless, more likely to cause mass panic than changes of heart. I think of my greatest disciple, with his own celestial training and insight, and of the lectures and finger-wagging he would give at such an instance, and I cannot help the crooked smile that stains my face. He would meet with the same failure as I do, and with

twice the amount of head-shaking. His mind is keen, but he never seems to accept the fundamentals. Know the cornerstone of life; this one morsel of truth: spit and dirt is all that we are.

The cloth merchant harumphs and holds his hand out to the cheated peasant girl, the lonely carpenter's wife, and she, with the patience that first caught my eye, without mentioning my speech or giving me a second glance, grips the overpriced silk strand between her fingers. It will make a shoddy hair tie at best, and I wonder why she even wants that scrap, that bare edge of something fine.

I was not always an immortal in a dung heap. There was a time when I was a mortal in a dung heap. And times when I was immortal and noticeably absent from a dung heap. But I prefer my current form as it keeps my interaction with man like his lifespan—short. I am not always met with success. It was many years ago, in a different village and its garbage when I first happened upon my greatest disciple. Then, he was only a scholar and the son of a scholar, a slight thing in my sight, as unremarkable to me as I was to him. But he had tenacity if nothing else, and even before he knew of my deity, would visit me on the dung heap to talk of the cultivation of goodness. He always finds me, time and time again, and today, as I leave the latest village, there is no exception.

He materializes by my side as I journey down the road. “Shifu,” he says, without any further greeting, “how can you expect your services to be sought or appreciated? You are ponderously fat with a paunch that juts from a shredded habit caked with dirt and other unmentionables. Your wrinkled bald head with its six tonsures are barely noticeable as marks of your divine calling, and your huge jowls are riddled with scabs, warts, and

blisters. These are hardly welcome invitations to conversation, while the smell clears even the flies from your path.”

He has made the same complaint numerous times before. Yet I know from the slight furrow of his brow, and the tremble of his lip that he has a truly momentous case, and when he leans in despite his complaints, I realize he cannot deny the need to seek counsel.

“Listen,” I say, replying as I always have, “to be truly holy, one must comprehend the filthiness of this world.”

“I would say your knowledge is unsurpassed, though liable to prevent many from investigating as deeply.”

“To know divinity, one must know what it is not.”

“But shifu, I know without taking your extremes.”

I resist the urge to cudgel him. I do have standards for sanctity after all. I am not at all mesmerized by the supple, soft charms of women, and I care not for society’s stakes in reputation, appearance, and cleanliness. I have resigned the world, you see. Certainly, my disciple insistently chides me for my propensity toward pork buns, dumplings, and wine. Though this may seem in contradiction to my vows, I say that this is an indication that the world has not resigned me.

“Undoubtedly,” I say to him, “you have yet to learn how to properly request help. I recommend humility. It is preferable to a harangue.”

“I do seek your advice,” he admits, and he tells me his case, one of a powerful demon disguised as a beauty, a veritable pearl. “Dainty and graceful,” he says, “the form

of a true lady of breeding, nothing like the roughhewn village girls you're always watching."

"The form is not indicative of true treasure," I say. "You are speaking of a demon."

"Yes, yes. She has taken a guise most men of standards find alluring, and bewitched a luckless woodcutter."

I nod and stifle a sigh. "I was a woodcutter once," I say, and my disciple waves his hands impatiently.

"Yes, yes," he says. "You have told me before, but this woodcutter faces a different danger. Spinning a lavish story of trial and persecution, the demon has convinced him to allow her to stay near his home, in a woodshed renovated for her comfort. He believes her an abandoned concubine of a fine noble, the unjustly abused victim of a first wife's wrath, and he is most taken with her while his own wife is most distressed.

"It was in these circumstances that I met him on the mountainside and read this story in his face. When I told him that the beautiful lady was a demon and offered my assistance, he rushed off with exceeding haste. And here I must consult you. What should I do now, shifu?"

He has come a long way from when we first met, during a time of great famine, when men became more of what they are and plundered each other. A few bandits with spears and halberds shining had found me in my dung heap, scratching one of my many scabs with a pottery shard. They meant to cut a beggar man for sport, and I, ready to mete divine punishment, prepared to quell their bloodlust with my iron staff.

That was when the man who would be my greatest disciple came forth, clamoring loudly that there was no virtue in maiming a wretch like myself, that all in the village were destitute, and there was nothing left to be offered or taken. He ended with a faltering, palsy appeal to the goodness of their black hearts. It was a hopeless speech, especially to the likes of bandits. Still, his effort was flattering if not altogether useful to a scabby immortal.

My disciple quivered inside his oversized robe, standing by the refuse pile and stuttering at the brigands, a bundle of twigs tied by a silk belt, his nostrils flaring at the stink and lowness of his situation. There was nothing inspiring about his stance or reedy voice, but regardless, I was impressed. There was no mistaking his resolution. All his strength and conviction shone forth from his eyes, radiant and doomed, circling birds in a sunlit windstorm, overthought ideals for virtue and righteousness stirred into some large, flurry of futile defiance he already regretted, and yet he did not fall back. He rent the air with his indignation, his absolute refusal to believe that even thugs would be so indecorous, so ill-mannered, so inappropriate, as to attack a madman in the garbage. And so only the air was affected by all his hemming and hawing. The bandits were quite ready to gleefully massacre the both of us, so I hefted my iron staff at their heads and with a few strokes disposed of them.

My greatest disciple swooned away. When his senses returned to him, he only saw a beggar sitting among a refuse of waste and bodies. Holding his sleeve to his nose, he scolded me for my particular propensity for violence, and for absolutely being too hasty. "Only heaven knows," he said, his voice still shaking and twanging as un-tuned zither strings, "whether in that moment those outlaws may have recanted and repented of

their misdeeds and turned toward a better life. But in death they are severely lacking in any such opportunities.”

I felt my hands clench on my iron cane, sweat dripping down my brow. But I was enlightened, a deity, inducted into mysteries and wisdom beyond his comprehension. “They had many chances before today,” I answered, deciding to take this moment to instruct. “But only one life. And wickedness has consequences, some of which are of unanticipated finality.”

So much time has passed since then, and so quickly. Even long after I revealed my deity, and long after I had left his home village, he followed if only to advise me on my conduct. I could not get rid of him, and now he requires me to instruct him properly again, give him the direction he seeks.

“Wait,” I tell him, though already I see him flinch at the very thought.

“For what purpose?” he protests.

Even as much changes, more remains the same. The conflicts he involved himself with used to be insufferably tedious, tirades over sons talking too loudly to their fathers, cooks who valued thrift over customers, gamblers with heavy drink cackling over cards. He went chasing after the slightest chance to do good, whether the chosen recipient of his generosity willed it or no. “All little wrongs build,” he used to say.

“Spit and dirt,” I would reply.

“We must raise man to be more than that,” he always retorted.

“A man will choose to be wrong over your interloping,” I used to say. I had no choice but to train him, if only so he was not murdered for his good intentions. It is something of a miracle I have not done so myself.

My greatest disciple. Still a man upright and forthright, tall and slender, always neatly groomed. I've called him hopeless, a fool, bumbling meddler, brainless and blind busybody. He is immaculately undisturbed. After all our time together his training has made his eyes as bright as fire, able to see through all deceit while his palms exude righteous energy for expelling evil.

I smile at him, uncertain if leek and meat are between my teeth. He does not like my counsel, but there is nothing else I can offer. For a simple woodcutter who knows nothing of his plight, the light vapors of incense and sweet words of abetment and relief will seem but strange illusions, the aftereffects of indigestion from overcooked porridge left too long in the pot. "You have told this woodcutter the truth, but now he needs to make his own conclusions."

"He could be killed tonight, snatched and eaten!"

"You think demons are so hasty? They can be more patient than men."

"But we are here to salvage and succor, is that not so? I have the prowess necessary, you have taught me."

"All that means is that you are a fine conjuror, a great magician. Still, you cannot accurately be called a savior."

"Regardless, I am trained to be an instrument of deliverance."

"One that needs fine tuning," I say. "Perhaps a couple thousand years worth."

My greatest disciple crosses his arms. "Certainly, certainly," he says, and we both know we are far from concordance. But he will have to wait regardless. The complications and lessons of this woodcutter's story are worth musing. A man's fate is of his own choosing and he indeed prefers to believe himself master. How can even

immortals shake this conviction? Once evil is invited in we cannot always move by our own volition. We must be asked.

My life was a parable, simple and stupid, the moral hackneyed, and I have told this story before. I was a woodcutter, and for the love of a village girl I worked hard. The long journeys I made into mountain wilds meant I was often alone, but I returned to the sight of her waving sleeve, and the ribbons in her hair, the shy smile flickering on her lips, and the black flash and crinkle of her eyes. She waited and watched constantly, for me, and for what would never come to pass. During a trek through perilous gorges, I slipped over a precipice and lamed myself. My right leg no longer had strength and I was forced to lean on a staff, hobbling and falling through the streets, unable to make means except by begging.

So the girl I loved was given to another man, to where my eyes and heart could not follow, and I became the beggar in the dump. I was not grateful, nor was I gracious in my transformation. My crooked leg pained me always and soon I was covered in soot and excrement, my hair and nails growing long, my mouth growing wider, hungrier. I depended on the alms thrown my way and I resented it with all the venom of my being. I began to root and tunnel in the waste, devouring spoiled meat, withered leaves of cabbage, rinds and entrails. I railed and lamented in the ashes, heaping insults and calling down curses.

The village feared I would bring misfortune to them all. They tried to reason with me at first, then they tried threats and pelting me with rubbish and the contents of chamber pots. But even when blood flowed and I lay buried in debris, I growled and

rolled, cursed and railed all the more. They left me thinking I would die as it grew colder, but they were wrong. Sun and wind could not drive me off, and rainstorms and snows did not wash me away. I remained enmeshed in their garbage, diseased, warped, and filthy beyond all recognition, surrounded by drowned rats and a few jumping fleas, horrendously alive. I was disgusting as ever before, I was abominable, I was impossible. I must have impressed them.

They no longer feared I would bring misfortune, but that I was misfortune, a natural disaster in and of itself. They began to pray and burn incense, brought offerings as though I was a demon that needed appeasing. But my stomach turned at the soft and scented delicacies they placed before me, and they spoiled at my feet. I had no use for the gold and silver they piled neatly at my side, and they were stolen by other beggars. A priest came to exorcise me and I laughed and rolled my eyes at his rituals, throwing trash when I had the energy, jeering when I could not.

I steadily grew weaker, my eyesight blurred, my limbs splayed thin and ulcer-eaten, and I could no longer open my jaw to speak. The villagers still regarded me as otherworldly, untouchable and immovable, beyond their effective reach. They gave me, in my final days, an iron staff, a crutch, a last attempt at pleasing heaven, at calming my spirit so I would not come back and haunt them, an angry ghost. They laid it by my wasted form and hoped for their own sakes that I would curse no more. I lingered, smoldering in the refuse, too feeble to fulminate any further, but filled with my inexpressible fury.

The villages tell a different story nowadays, about what a generous soul I was in life, how I resisted the carnal temptation of a woman's body, eschewed the gluttony of

appetite, cultivated my soul with poverty, and invited all the demons of sickness that plagued my home village onto my own body. How can anyone be made immortal, become saint and sage, without achievements, without good deeds? How could they acknowledge such a thing? I was remade into the ultimate example of altruism because I was so truly spit and dirt.

In the final throes of my mortality, I looked away from that iron crutch, final and useless offering, and felt the weight of my own misery. Propped against the waste I raised my eyes and saw a woman walking by, bent and tired by some heavy load on her back. She might have been the same lady I once loved. She came close, closer than most dared, and though I could not see her face except as haze, I felt the pressure of her eyes. “How could you bring this on yourself?” she said quietly, so I almost could not hear her. But her words were twin swords piercing my breast, her revulsion at my state unmistakable, and as sincere as her pity.

She did not understand me. None of my village had. They had tried, with what little they thought they knew of me, to respond appropriately, but they did not know what they did. We did not know the other’s suffering. I saw the absurdity of my actions plainly. The pain, the betrayal, and the disappointment had been mine alone, all others were completely ignorant of it. Even I did not fully understand the depth of my emotion. So why did I blame anyone? For what reason and to what purpose had I been angry? I had done this to myself.

I cannot exactly say that in that moment I forgave them, but I can say that I wished to. I wanted to forgive and be done, to have the strength, the discipline, the ability, but I myself was insurmountable, the unmovable obstacle. I wanted help, I needed help,

and with all that was left of my breath I begged to be something better, something that could forgive, something that was forgivable. And then I clutched the iron staff and died.

In the few days after my disciple left with my disappointing advice, I made my way to yet another village. The new trash heap I come to is conveniently close to a popular dumpling house, and I waste no time in visiting. When I go in, all other customers give way and vacate the premises so I may take my pork in the utmost peace and quiet. The cook glares and a few retreating customers hurl unrepeatable invectives, but the best means to send me on my way, without laying hands on my illustrious form, is to serve me.

I was deliberating over my soup bowl when my disciple rushed over. “Master,” he says, “I am overjoyed to find you here. The woodcutter’s reason has returned. He crept to the woodshed unnoticed shortly after my warning, and peeked in to discover the beauty’s true form. He gazed on her light-green features and sharp teeth, and saw her writing and painting on a large skein of human skin. Before his eyes she finished her calligraphy and draped the skin over her body, transforming instantly into the fair maiden he first encountered. Recognizing her as a flesh-eater he ran through the forest till he found me.”

My disciple’s thin chest is puffing. He is glad, he is happy, he has found the true joy and purpose of an ethical life. “I have given him a ward against her to hang over his door. If he resists her three days without leaving his house she will be permanently repelled. It is already the third day and by dusk he will be free of her.”

I shrug. “Perhaps,” I say, “I could assist.”

“I couldn’t trouble you, shifu. The task is near done; I can make my own works.”

I had offered my own mortal life as an example before, he knew indeed of how I was a woodcutter once. But he never learned the lesson in the telling. Even now, as I expound on how vain it is to think too highly of one's own abilities, that I had attained immortality without anything that could really be called works, he merely nods with polite disinterest. He believes me, or at least he thinks he does, but I can read his bored glances. He reasons me away. "You are one of the great immortals, shifu, and you look back harshly on your unenlightened self," he says. "Surely you did more than you admit, and I must emulate you in action."

It is hard to reason with a mind already decided. "See it through as you will. It is right to resolve to do good," I say. "But for all the upright intentions we have, sometimes our hands cannot work our will. And even so, examine closely the attitude and motives of your heart. It can be a deceitful thing."

My greatest disciple only laughs, already standing, ready to grant a great deed. "But shifu," he protests. "what of man's original heart, which was said to be pure?"

Of course a scholar's son would know of this philosophy. "Ah, pure it was," I say to my stubborn disciple. "Very pure." But if man had an original heart, he has long lost it. It has been cut out, traded, for something less, for man is a creature that cheats himself. He can no longer lay claim to this pure thing, he may not even wish for it. Even were another trade allowed, he would have nothing to offer that was equal, he would have no means to bargain with. What could he give to get it back, to return to the original heart, this new heart? All he can do is beg, to stupidly hope to receive all for nothing. Even then, to receive this new heart would be a painful exchange. Every time a most painful exchange.

I do not say this to impress with my modesty, to hint that my pride lies in my humility. When I died, I had hoped for the end. There was little joy or hope when my eyes opened and I saw white clouds, soft and down, when I heard the gentle music of lutes and swaying fairies.

I was appalled as I stood up and saw palaces of crystal and jade, and trembled when I caught sight of a host of youths in splendid robes, embroidered in gold and silver, laden with precious stones. One of them floated over to welcome me, his sleeves drifting with the fine, sheer delicacy of a dragonfly's wing, sash and silk haloing his form. My body was whole, perfect, and unadorned in this new life, but when I bent my head I saw that the iron crutch had followed me to the sky, and that I leaned heavily upon it still.

"There has been a mistake," I stammered when he drew close.

"You admit you are undeserving?" he said, and I saw that his skin and eyes shone.

"There is nothing to gainsay."

"You are right," the immortal one said. "You are a martyr, a saint, you have borne suffering without complaint or ill-will, and demonstrated grand compassion in your forgiveness."

"Did I?" I said, more than a little taken aback. "But you have just said I am not deserving."

"You are not."

"But isn't this heaven?"

“In a manner of speaking, but no,” the youth said. “Call this enlightenment if you will, a taste of divinity, an immortality of a kind. Consider this a mere step in what is hopefully a voyage of continual ascension.”

“How convenient,” I said. “God makes the most confounding choices.”

“Mysterious,” the eternal youth said, already raising his hand to stop my protest. “And true, that is the same as confounding.”

So I found I had come into enlightenment. A most uneasy state. I thought perhaps this was my second chance, where I earned heaven. So I scoured for hints. I watched my fellow immortals sipping sweet liqueur, satisfied to leave behind all earthly ties to repose at Penglai Mountain, drinking from golden wine cups that never empty, under trees burdened by their iridescent jewels. I met others who wandered onto the mortal realm for entertainment, because a few individuals on earth interested them, and with cordial enough interactions. Still a few liked simply to walk through and observe without any direct conversation, taking on guises as philosophers and teachers, princes and nobles, gathering some attention from mortal audiences, leaving behind a few words of wisdom before returning to this paradise that wasn't heaven. Either way, I was told they were all furthering their understanding in their own way, by their particular means.

I was enthusiastic at first, I trained diligently under various masters, grasped techniques and spells both subtle and powerful, no matter the effort, no matter the procedures. But Penglai Mountain was a beautiful bore with no means to exercise my talents, so I returned in high spirits to the mortal realm. Yet the more time I spent among people, the more I saw of what I already knew, the wantonness with the brief moments of light, hands turned mainly toward oneself, ignorance, and an ungainly lack of effort. I

went down as prince and noble, spoke my words and saw them take no root. I went as benevolent interloper, rescued orphans and succored widows and saw them turn and forget me. Some rose in their station and filled me with vague wonder and pride, but most remained as they were or lowered themselves further. They suffered, yes they suffered, I saw too much of that, but they suffered due to their own decisions, they suffered without looking to anyone else, they suffered without a will to suffer any less. If crowds pressed in on me it was not to ask and learn, but to exact and critique. They came rabbling and rousing for their turn at a miracle, to have hands laid on them, demanding more sights, more help, their wants endless. But whatever I offered was never enough.

So I grew cantankerous, so I grew irritated. I could not earn heaven, and I could not reveal it to anyone else. I began to wax ever more philosophical, began to wonder if any good deed was worthwhile, if perhaps it was better these people suffer and die when they were so determined to do so. Perhaps it was good that we are not a world of immortals when deathlessness brings its own hell. There would be even less incentive to use time wisely, to pursue learning and self-betterment. Unenlightened immortals would find little value in learning from mistakes, correcting wrongs, and loving well. Gone would be filial piety, marital fidelity, veneration of the elderly, and nurturing for the young. They did it little as it was.

Death was all that made living precious. Should a finite being understand its limits and bounds, life is imbued with meaning, relationships with tenderness. Though death is not the ultimate means to goodness it can make mortals yearn to have their passage be a full and fruitful one. Breath becomes priceless. Love becomes sweet.

Death is a life lesson. It is repeated over and over again in the mortal world and yet so few learned this. All was lowborn and dust-fed. My forms and guises became gross, I grew fat, I hobbled again, rocked about with the crutch, I sank down into the trash heaps and begged in the dust.

When next I saw my greatest disciple his fire-bright eyes were reddened, while an ashy circle colored his lower lids. In his hand was a gourd, tied round the middle with a colored silk string, which he handed to me. “Teacher,” he said, “I have caught the monster.”

It was a tale punctuated by disaster. Wrapped in the beauty’s skin the demon had taken to the most deplorable laments, complaining and crying at her abused state, sounding so pitiful that the woodcutter leaned his head out the window. Seizing his hair, the demon dragged him outside, split open his chest and swallowed his heart.

My disciple pursued her across three provinces, traipsing across the treetops and bamboo stalks, flitting over the brooks and diving into the deeps. She transformed into a sparrow, frog, deer, and my disciple became a hawk, heron, and hunter. She changed into a toddling old woman but still my disciple saw the truth and pierced her through with a sword. She abandoned her human skin then, sloughed on the ground in a wrinkled heap, and in one last attempt to escape became a green mist. But my disciple unstopped his gourd and bottled her in one swift movement.

I shook the gourd, hearing the slushy slop of a well-dissolved demon. “I see it was not easy indeed, no wonder you commemorated the victory with this bit of ribbon.”

My disciple sighed. “It was a gift from the woodcutter, when he thought her a human lady. I doubt she found it satisfactory, but this was the best the man had to offer.”

The weave and color on the ribbon are discernibly delicate and fine. I am no expert purveyor of silks, but I’ve sat near markets long enough, and this does seem something a woman would prefer. That a woodcutter would know such feminine preferences given the demands of his profession is unexpected. But while the choice is fitting, it remains inadequate, a thin silk strand, a dusty scrap. His best was such a meager thing. “This seems rather familiar, a popular style I suppose. But her ultimate desire for his life was far more extravagant than this. You have done a great favor for mankind in dispatching her.”

“Too late for the woodcutter,” my greatest disciple says. “I have failed.”

“There are limits to what a man will let you do for him. The woodcutter, alas, should have known to fear all women. I would have thought his wife taught him as much.”

My disciple’s face fell further. “The woman is inconsolable.”

“It was her husband’s fault. She will find better sorts.”

“She has no desire for better sorts. She pleaded with me to resurrect him once I returned from quelling the demon. I do not have that power, shifu.”

“The training did not much strike you.”

“I refused your help before, master, but I ask it now. I need further instruction, I need aid, succor, deliverance from this tragedy. I am not enough on my own.”

“I could say the same,” I reply, but his lengthy petition was worrying me. “I need plenty of help to just bear you. We cannot save every man. You truly are a hopeless fool if you cannot realize this.”

“But though you call me hopeless you persist in teaching your unworthy student. You speak harshly so I know myself. You must rebuke and correct for my good, make me aware of my hopelessness so I want for hope, and show my disgrace so I may be given grace. You cannot fool me, shifu, I see through your ruse. You will help me.”

I suppose to the pure all things are pure. But I feel obligated to remind him of more unsavory actualities. “I have not given any consent of that sort, though you are eager to attribute it to me.”

“I told that woman about you.”

It was my turn to sigh. This wife, this injured woman would come to ask for something most taxing. There was a reason the other immortals turned their nose up when I was keen to add resurrection to my abilities. There is a reason it is called the Indelicate Art, and it is not a frequent undertaking of mine. So many want healing to be easy. But there is nothing easy, comfortable, or soothing about this matter, and not all corpses are worth the effort. In all truth, none are.

“She will not appreciate my methods,” I say.

“She’s prepared herself for the worst. I described you as accurately as possible in appearance.”

“Even my illustriously long earlobes that drape down to my shoulders?”

“I am sure I mentioned it. I also told her you were coarse and rude, that you smell like a soured combination of sweat, wine, and vomit, and liable to produce the most unlikely cure.”

“And she still undertakes to seek me?”

“She claims she will go to the ends of the earth.”

“A lofty if improbable declaration. Still, the first in a long time.”

“Shifu,” he protested. “With your ability to lighten troubles, why would you not do so?”

“Lift them from the mud so they may sink back again?”

“You are too callous, shifu. How can you be so sure? Do you have foreknowledge as yet another one of your many talents?”

“This is not prophecy, my student. This is simply knowing what a man is.”

“But I am a man too, am I not? And you, you are a man.”

I smile at my hapless disciple. Perhaps he thought he was making an argument for his cause. “I never said I was better. Only enlightened. But still, spit and dirt—”

“Shifu, you have observed numerous times our composition as spit and dirt. Why do you neglect our third aspect?”

A scholar and the son of a scholar. “The third is negligible.”

“Breath,” my greatest disciple says.

“Negligible.”

“But the one source of our life. The one thing this poor woodcutter needs.”

“And what he least deserves.”

My greatest disciple rolls his eyes in exasperation. “Shifu, surely you have not forgotten what it is to be mortal?”

“Never. Though I often wish I could.”

In something of the early days of my own training, I returned to Penglai in dark humors. That everlasting youth who had first greeted me when I gained immortality was waiting when I arrived, gliding breezily over with a beatific smile before asking how my century had gone.

When I was done grouching he peacefully folded his arms. “You are rather unsympathetic for a saint,” was all he said.

“Perhaps I am merely unoriginal,” I replied.

“On the contrary. There is still much for you to learn.”

“I’ve learned of dirt clods that do not recognize what beggars they are, there is little I want to study further. It is blatant mankind requires divine assistance.”

“You are divine assistance.”

I leaned on my staff, even though I knew all renowned immortals should maintain peerless posture. “I cannot argue,” was what I said. “And also, I cannot help myself.”

“Heaven will help. Ask.”

But this is not such a simple thing, as any beggar knows. He exists on the edge of annihilation because he is lacking, because he does not have, he cannot obtain, and yet he needs. Asking acknowledges this much, asking means that perhaps one should be denied, and asking is an imposition. A giver must lose and be willing to lose. The beggar does not always receive what he expects. Both may feel themselves cheated.

It is hard to count loss as gain.

I wait at the dumpling house in acquiescence to my disciple's wishes because I know how he is, relentless, uncompromising, tiresomely indefatigable. He has changed himself into an iridescent green and blue fly, a brave fly, that settles staunchly on my cheek. I doubt anything will come of waiting, but at least I may indulge in dumplings. "Shifu," my greatest disciple drones, "Look on her with some pity, show mercy." I ponder how much more wine I'll need to preserve my equanimity.

"Her husband certainly is not worth much. Is she?"

"Since when did 'worthy' and 'not worthy' dictate mercy?"

"But does she know what she asks for? A resurrection is about more than grief, and death is above pride."

Of course my disciple would have had a ready retort, but he is distracted by the exclamations of the crowd a respectful distance away. These fellows have been waiting to enjoy dumplings without my company, but their murmur is not simply impatience. One of their number is pushing through.

"It is her!" my disciple whispers excitedly, flitting and hopping from one of my jowls to the next. "The woodcutter's wife!"

And I see her. Yes, I have seen her. When she comes, it is a rare occurrence, but one I always note. Her dull hair and hunched aspect familiar, the slit sickles of her eyes, narrowed and puffed with weeping. It is the same peasant I observed in the village many li away, and I am aghast, I am baffled. I am a plucked chicken dunked into soup, and in my amazement I simultaneously belched and farted.

The crowd ripples with laughter. Some of them call for the woodcutter's wife to leave me, that I am a hack, a fake, no help indeed. Yet she does not take their good advice. Other than a slight flare in the nostrils and a pale complexion, she takes my gaseousness quite gracefully and impressively. Her arms do not even leave her side.

"Great Sage," she says, her voice a soft tremble. She remembers me. Her eyes widen slightly, ivory crescents set with jet. "I did not know who you were before."

"You do not know me now," I say, for I am impetuous, I am horrified, I am abhorred. "But I have heard of you. You want second life, resurrection. This is an extravagant request. Find your solace in meditation and prayer. What can I offer you? I am not God."

"I know you are not, for to God this is a small thing and I would not be denied."

"Not so small," I say, while the crowd mutters and heckles that I am mad, I am dangerous. "Even the all-powerful face difficulties. My cures have been spurned before, yet even God may have chosen similar methods. But as I am not nearly as heavenly—though do not be fooled, I am still great in my own right—my approach could be downright impossible for you."

"Even so," she said. "I would cut out my heart for his." And though she is bowed and bent, she is firm.

"A noble proposal," I say, "But my method involves nothing so noble, nor would you have to resort to hyperbole if your husband's heart had not strayed."

"The noble course is to seek it out again." She is gazing straight at me, and it seems she is truly willing to meet any price. I cannot understand it.

“You expend for no return. Everything good he had he wasted on another. Man generally has only one life, and he lost his on some unknown wastrel who happened to be a demon.”

“He could discover true contrition in his second life, change his ways, make amends.”

“A slim chance. You wait for nothing, for what will never come to pass. He will forget your kindness, he will fall back into old habits, into miseries, he will shame and humiliate you, sit in ashes.”

“But there is a chance.”

“Or it may be hopeless.”

A tiny, shrill voice immediately calls into my ear: “Shifu, you constantly call me hopeless. Yet you do not forsake me.” I swat at the fly on my cheek, and my greatest disciple buzzes off.

“Please,” she says. “Not because we are deserving, not because we can earn this favor.”

“Then why?”

“Because there is no hope otherwise,” my greatest disciple squeaks, careening through the air, whipping past my ears, a whining halo just barely avoiding my palm. But I wait for the woodcutter’s wife to answer, the crowd humming.

They discuss us openly. They know her situation, they know what she comes to ask from me, and already they make their conclusions. They doubt I am anywhere near divine, except in the art of repelling. Whatever other powers I may have are not worthwhile, they say, there must be other means, cleaner, lovelier means besides looking

to the garbage pile. To solicit anything of me is absurd enough, to think of what I may ask in return is preposterous. They have already determined that the price is too high, ridiculous, a cheat, if it comes to asking me. They don't know how right they are, but who can strike a bargain with death? Of course the price is steep, of course it is extortion. All eyes on her and judgment is passed on the both of us, how shaming, how humiliating, disgraceful, outrageous. Beyond bound and belief.

And she kneels, hands to her breast, before she falls further, hands on the ground. Her face crumples, skin folding in on skin, a mass of wrinkles over the wide gaping hole of her mouth. Her eyes are distinguishable only because of the water leaking from them, her cheeks angry red welts. The weight of her sorrow is deforming, horrible and frightening. It is beautiful.

“There is no reason,” she said. “Except that you will, despite what we are, as we are.”

“You know the man you wish revived. He is garbage, he is trash, he is worthless. A horrid man who let his heart be cut out.” I say this, though it is a losing battle. My disciple still weaves and whines about my head as pests do, and the sky vaults open and clear above. I am hemmed in, I am trapped. The woodcutter brought his end on himself, he is not worth raising, and he does not deserve her. All this is true. “Why do you bother begging?”

She looks at me, the pressure of her gaze unmistakable. The crowd leans and the silence waits, heaven arches limitlessly; we all know her reason, there is only one truth this pathetic and unfathomable, and yet we linger for it, we listen for the words. And she

says what I fear, the one truth that outmaneuvers me every time. "I love him," she says. And I am cheated, hurt, I am pierced.

So I hacked up phlegm, mixed the glistening mass of yellow spit with the grime from under my armpit and rolled it all together until I had a mashed, lopsided ball in my hand. "Eat this," I told her.

I have heard many, many prayers and outcries. Men have rent their flesh and women have torn their hair. They demand mercy, they demand justice, and they weep and wail at the hardness of heaven, at the coldness of God. But I am immortal, and I have seen the span of lifetimes, I have seen and known the plight of not just a few but thousands upon millions. I have heard many such prayers; they have passed through my own lips time and time again.

Spit and dirt. The heart is rarely greater than the body. Another nugget of enlightenment: the heart is a filthy thing. It is the wellspring of impurities, the seat of horrors, and the center of life. What breath a man takes in is moved by this heart, and this heart only moves because of breath.

I should tell the last of these events. The woman swallowed my pill. Despite her own nausea and the prying eyes of busybodies, she did this. And so, the clotting lump lodged in her gullet. She returned home for I would do nothing further for her at the dumpling house. I laughed, hit her lightly on the head with my staff and walked off. She ran after me, but there is no point in chasing an immortal.

So she could not find me even though I was with her. I traveled with her on the journey back as she burned with insult and doubt, when she cleaned her husband's

bloodied corpse and carefully stuffed his intestines back into the flap of his chest, averting her eyes from the leftover hollow.

And I was deep in the mountains, my greatest disciple at my side, eyes shut tight while my lips moved incessantly. The sky darkened and the rain fell, beating a crying rhythm against my body. I prayed, feeling the waves of her sorrow, every tremor and convulsion that wrecked her body. I prayed, because even we must reach higher, even we search for the lifeline of divinity. The air entering through our nose and mouth, the words exiting from between clenched teeth, gasped and desperate. It has always appalled me just how much help I need, and it has always hurt to ask.

And while she cried, I moved up her throat where I leaped from her mouth into the woodcutter's split breast. On the mountainside I prayed while I languished in the dead man's chest, and his widow tenderly wrapped a sheet around him to warm me. I prayed, soaring to heaven and surging with thunder. And I pulsed and died to become something better.

"Shifu," my greatest disciple said once the storm abated and we walked down the mountainside. "When I first met you, I thought you a poor, unenlightened wretch on a precipice toward damnation. My sight has changed dramatically. When we came up the mountain you were a fat, crusty monk, but now you shine purely and your form is both beautiful and sweet-smelling. How strange. Now it is you who have enlightened me."

"Ah," I say, a little offset by the change I see in my student. "The feeling is rather mutual."

He shines with light, emanating from his fingertips, unquenchable fire in his eyes that radiates golden over his face. Really, he is my disciple no longer, but a bright immortal, an eternal youth, a blazing star, a white flame.

“The crusty old monk was no lie,” I say, “and you are still the scholar and the son of a scholar. Albeit immortal.”

“Thank you, shifu. I understand you now, I know who you are, truly impressive, martyr and saint. Your lessons are effective, inspiring, awesome, the moral you wished to impart to me clear. It is –”

“We’ve expounded many morals today. I, on the other hand, understand you are an egregious sycophant. Effusive. And lacking discipline.”

“I am simply unafraid,” my former student says, “to state the whole of my sincerest thoughts. But what of our prayers for the woodcutter and his wife? Are they reunited?”

I cannot help the smile that creeps upon my face. “They are. The woodcutter has awoken as though from a dream, his wife is by his side and he is grateful, he is moved, he is utterly stunned, and he knows what she has done for him. She knows he knows.”

“You can see them from this far, shifu?”

“I am there even now.”

I already know how their story ends. They will squabble and fight once the novelty of resurrection wears thin, old arguments and peevish, valid and invalid, return and return. Hardship will press on them, their neighbors and friends will hassle, and their children will leave. I know this; it is the way of mortals, the ancient path we go, both old and new our lives. I know this; I am the woodcutter’s heart. Even a life renewed is a life

of hazards we cannot see, winds we do not control, and always ourselves, the mistakes we make in journeying, the reflections and figments we grasp for, and the mud. Yes, always the mud.

But why should this dampen my hope? I carry my iron staff so I can walk this road over and over, no matter how painful, over and over. I beat behind the scar in the woodcutter's chest, fitful and fearful, cringing and shamed at the touch of a love undeserved. And I want to reach back, I want to go on. For that brief sight of joy, the moments of wonder and renewed faith, of high prospects and possibilities, the wind passing through and a glimpse of my dirt trail unwinding like a ribbon, over hills and valleys, into the river, into the ocean, into the sky.

Mr. Goodman

Chapter 1

Robert Goodman sat in the Army lounge at 0445 hours, primed and ready. There was no sign of a sunrise yet but he felt good. This was his favorite time in Berkeley, no crowds and noise, but quietness, calm, everything for the moment ordered. He closed his eyes, tapping his fingers along his knee to a melody inside his head, an old piece, one of many he had practiced at out of a piano book. He couldn't remember the name of the tune, or whether it was classical, baroque, or otherwise, but stopped himself.

The room was empty as of yet, but in about fifteen minutes one or two sleepy cadets, the more dedicated members, would wander in through the doors. He would see more cadets later, during the 0600 Physical Training session, but by now Robert was accustomed to the early dawn hours. It wasn't all that hard to lead the extra 0500 session, and even on the few rare days when nobody came, he always made sure to start PT on time.

Robert took a quick survey of the lounge, making sure that the desks were uncluttered, the floor was clean, the shelves neatly stacked with field manuals and training guides, lockers and mailboxes locked, that the Golden Bear battalion flag present, everything in its place and secure. He was planning a run up to the big C this session, an advanced workout that many ROTC cadets couldn't fully complete due to the steepness of the trail, but those who came to the early sessions tended to have higher physical prowess, more discipline. The old Army slogan, "Be All That You Can Be" drifted across Robert's mind. He hummed the tune that went with the words, bobbing his head to the

new rhythm. Today was the first day of Robert's final semester as a cadet and student at UC Berkeley. He wanted to start with a challenge.

For three and a half years, ROTC had been his life. The early mornings, the late nights, the rush to and from classes, hurried uniform changes before the formations, marches and training, travel, testing, and military schools, the frantic bouts of studying and classes. He'd run the entire Army ROTC gamut: going through all the FTXs, the Warrior Forge LDAC training, the leadership labs, the Ranger Challenges, military balls, award ceremonies, commissioning ceremonies for the Military Science classes ahead of his, football games, and ROTC tabling. Fort Hunter-Liggit, Camp Parks, Fort Lewis, Hearst Gymnasium, Berkeley Marina, Hotel Durant, Cal football stadium, Sather Gate.

Especially now as he prepared to leave ROTC behind, Robert wondered if he had proved himself. He had started at the bottom and through sheer determination, worked his way to the top. He was the cadet commander as an MS-IV in the Golden Bear Battalion. He had earned his plaudits, he had swept the awards ceremonies last year as an MS-III. The battalion commander had spoken of him as the most upstanding soldier she had had the joy of mentoring. He was well-liked enough, his peers asked him for advice, and his juniors listened to him. He'd run the battalion well, he'd looked over all the details and he had done everything asked of him. He had every right to feel proud of what he'd accomplished. He was set not only to graduate in spring, but to make the final transition into the military life, to become officially part of the US Army. All that was left was his own commissioning ceremony.

Then it was a whole new life. As a second lieutenant, he'd enter Active Duty, he'd go other places. He wondered vaguely where. He'd put in for Fort Irwin, Presidio of

Monterey, but was content with any base that wasn't in Northern California. Someplace open, warmer, quiet, he didn't care if it was out of the way. Robert couldn't help the smile that crept across his face and he leaned back against the sofa. He could do it. It would be fine. The clock on the wall across from him told him the time. There was no reason not to think he was off to a propitious start. He had discipline, he had dedication, he knew the meaning of work and endurance. He even liked the clear-cut nature of ROTC, the logical nature of exercises and skills, the move toward organization, even the hierarchy. It wasn't always easy of course, but there were rewards, there was progression, practical application and real-life consequences. It mattered.

Robert headed for the door, glancing at the bulletin board as he went. A list of new members of ROTC was pinned up, and as he casually scanned through the multitude of names his eye caught on the name Brandon Li. Some of the cadre had been talking about this person the semester before. Most times, conversations about recruitment were speculative, plenty of students came by ROTC looking for scholarship opportunities or just to test the program out, but few tended to stick. Only about twenty or thirty new students would register for the program through the Military Science course listings, more than half dropped out by the second week, a few more would finish out the semester, and only a handful would register for the next term. Even during the course of the semester students would hardly come in to classes or labs much less the PT sessions. Not everybody could do this.

But this Brandon Li was an SMP entry, simultaneous membership program, a long-winded way of denoting that this particular freshman, sophomore, or even junior, had prior military experience. An enlisted soldier, usually a Reservist. And what was

more, Robert did remember hearing Brandon Li had been deployed before. Iraq or Afghanistan.

Robert's good mood was dissipating. As a general rule, Robert didn't like the SMP cadets. When he'd first entered ROTC, they were the ones who gave him the most trouble. He'd known instantly who the small group of prior service people were because they harped on their status, that they'd been to Basic, been in the Army awhile already, perhaps was an NCO, or higher-ranked on the enlisted side, but what was the worst was if they had been deployed before. He knew there were SMP cadets of the likable, tolerable sort, but they tended to have the opposite characteristics, lower-ranking, newer to Army life, never deployed. There seemed to be little difference between that kind of a SMP cadet and a regular cadet. But if a SMP crowed that he had "experience," it was a sure sign of trouble. It was an especially consistent pattern that these SMPs were also Reservists and National Guardsmen, meaning that their military commitment hadn't even been full-time. Except for their all-important deployment they showed up for a drill weekend once a month. Still, "You don't know how the real Army works" was a common catchphrase of these seasoned prior duty soldiers. "This isn't the real Army."

The door suddenly opened and one of the MS-IIIs shuffled in. It was exactly 0500. "There's just me," the cadet said but a second later he put his hand to his head, rubbing his eyes. "Oh yeah, and a new guy. Li, I think it is."

Robert's mouth stretched into a strained smile. "Excellent."

He found himself bracing for the worst. But when he went outside with the other cadet, Robert was surprised by how alert Brandon Li was. He stood with his hands behind his back, parade rest, his shoulders squared, and his back straight, a short, stocky,

but muscular figure. He wore only the T-shirt and shorts of the PT uniform, without any sign of the jacket and sweat ensemble that was permitted due to the early morning cool. He showed no signs of being cold either way. Instead, he waited impassively for Robert to approach. His black, narrow eyes watched, bright and wakeful, but closed off and distant like his other features, the unsmiling, thin lips, short-cropped hair, and small, rounded nose. It was hard to find fault with the quiet figure. There was nothing sloppy, smug, or insolent about Brandon Li.

“Good morning,” Robert said. “I’m Cadet Goodman. Cadet Li I’m assuming?”

Li nodded. “Morning, Mr. Goodman,” he returned.

Robert crossed his arms. He wasn’t sure whether Brandon Li was a typical SMP cadet, or a likable one. He quickly went through a range of stretches before their run, no need to be official with the two-man group at his disposal, but when he asked as a matter of habit, whether there were any questions before they began PT, Li’s voice piped up.

“Mr. Goodman,” he said, “Is that what you are?”

Robert found his lip curling while the one other cadet grinned. He’d heard enough comments about his last name to last a lifetime. “Good enough,” he returned.

But there was no flash of humor in Li’s face. Instead, his eyes narrowed even further, something like a smirk curving his lips. “That won’t cut it.”

Robert felt a flash of heat rising to his cheeks. Neither typical nor likable.

Chapter 2

Robert owed a lot to ROTC. He never knew all that he was capable of until it had been demanded. The program had truly given him a sense of his abilities, his potential,

his selfhood in many ways, as well as the confidence that he could maintain it. And it really was because of ROTC that he'd been able to stand Berkeley in the first place.

When he'd entered Cal as a freshman, a gangly mass of limbs due to a sudden growth spurt, his first week at Berkeley was an unpleasant surprise. Robert's home city of Pasadena was not simply warmer than the Bay Area, it was clean and neat. The houses stood in their steady rows, the streets smooth and straight. Southern Californian sunshine, which could be harsh, was modulated, softened by the cooler green of meticulously maintained lawns, the vibrant shapes and colors of tended flowers.

But Berkeley didn't have much in the way of sunlight. The sky was constantly clouded, and the streets were narrow, confusingly overrun by one-ways, and crumbling and stained by traffic. The university itself made pretenses at stateliness, the white Greek columns and stairs of Sproul Hall, the flat, square, concrete expanse of Sproul Plaza before it, the decorative iron curves of Sather Gate, the straight, firm lines and clock tower of the Campanile, but the bustling city at its outskirts was dark, dirty, and raucous. Bums teemed along the sidewalks with signs and smudged faces. People with fakes smiles and clipboards loitered desperate to talk about their cause. Loud rallies composed of protestors that didn't even look like students.

The shop-fronts down Telegraph Avenue were small and cramped, and right outside their doors vendors made their stands filled with miscellaneous, unclassifiable paraphenelia. Shoddily shaped wire passing as handmade jewelry, oversized political patches and figurines, stickers and clothes with confusing logos and insults, misshapen hookahs and mobiles, and most famously, a tie-died hippie T-shirt stand. Worst of all, students teemed through these small, filthy spaces, babbling excitedly about them.

The freshman dorms were likewise filled with unmitigated, noisy enthusiasm. People introduced themselves, pasted colored paper with their names on their doors, sat in hallways or did handstands in them. Floor mates talked too fast about how much fun they were having, how dazzling Telegraph Avenue was, the thrill of riding a bus, doing laundry for the first time, having their minds expanded exponentially from hearing a professor speak or a conversation with an incredibly intelligent bum. Robert, while trying to maintain a polite façade, had instantly known he didn't belong.

He found Berkeley and especially Telegraph disturbingly unsanitary. He was confused by lectures even when he thought he understood them, found laundry to be what it always was, a chore, and he had no desire whatsoever to converse with the homeless. He also didn't get along with his roommate namely because they had opposing ideas of a good time. Robert didn't want to hit the city or go to clubs, have a drink or check out a frat. He wanted to get settled, finish all the homework he was assigned, figure out his major, the requirements, and get his degree.

His roommate had called Robert a genius with a smirk, and Robert had quickly tried to correct this terminology. "It's not that hard," Robert had said. "You just study. You park yourself in a chair and actually read."

His roommate's smirk had changed into more of a scowl. "Dude," he said. "Loosen up. I know what your face looks like, but you don't have to be a drag." Robert did look severe. There was no boyishness in his looks, he was too hard and angular, sharp chin, hawk nose, and pale blue eyes. Robert hadn't known how to respond, and his roommate had thrown up his arms before leaving for a nearby frat party. "Why can't you, like, finally get a personality?"

ROTC, at first, was just something Robert thought of because of the Army commercials. He'd always been told to be the best in whatever he undertook, so perhaps it made sense that the Army slogan had appeal. Still, elementary through high school he'd been a scrawny kid, the one most easily forgotten in the background. He worked hard, he'd always known to work hard, but he'd never been sure what he could be.

When he walked into Hearst Gymnasium, it was the calm that surprised him. Despite Hearst being located right on Bancroft, the main street that also ran past Sproul Hall and Sather Gate, the area was open and clear. His footsteps echoed in the dimly lit halls, and he wandered up and down before he finally went through a set of doors that led to brighter, narrower halls lined with pictures of flags, insignias, and photo portraits of uniformed servicemen and finally a series of offices with open doors and live individuals in uniform sitting inside. A few of them instantly came out when they saw him, greeting him with a wide smile, a handshake, and a courteous dip of their head, but he could see they weren't much older than he was. They introduced themselves after a "How are you?" with their first and last names and very promptly escorted him to a sergeant major in another office further down.

Robert's nervousness abated as the sergeant major simply asked him about classes, his goals as a student and beyond, before launching into the duties and opportunities of the program. The sergeant major talked easily about what he did in the Army as an enlisted member, what the role of officers was, the interaction of the two.

"Enlisted guys are our "on-the-ground-guys," the main executors of tasks from above. They don't always have to be highly-skilled workers though they're trained for whatever occupation they enter, and they're the main troops in the Army. Most Army

guys are enlisted guys. Officers are the guys above, and they enter the same fields as the enlisted guys, but engage in the more managerial, professional, and technical aspects. Either you're running the overall mechanics of an Army unit, or you're a specialist with expert knowledge, like how all pilots are officers. You like getting into the specifics of a job, or the overall administration of an organization, officer work is more your type. You like being with regular troops and getting your hands dirty, well, that's why I like being an NCO."

He mentioned how important the Army was as an institution that protected the nation while giving its members the chance to go around the world, to advance a career, to gain important leadership and technical skills.

"People like you who want to give time in service are good people, so the Army does give back," the sergeant major had said. "You checking us out like this, it really shows you have a sense of civic duty, of honor and sacrifice, and dedication to all the ideals that make this nation great. That's an outstanding and an admirable thing, especially in young people. You could be doing anything else right now, you could be at a party, or just doing your own thing, but you're here. You want to do this, of course we need you and people like you."

Robert had felt himself shifting in his seat uneasily though and looking at the clock behind the sergeant major. He thought about the couple of students in uniform who had greeted him. They had seemed clean-cut and alert, but he wasn't sure if he was quite the same caliber.

But the sergeant major had smiled and leaned forward. "I know it's not something you decide overnight. But don't think you can't do something in the Army, or that you're

not tough or strong enough. We need all kinds of people, support and combat, jobs that go almost unnoticed, and higher-profile stuff, they're all parts of a whole that succeeds only because they work together. And no matter what you do, there'll be challenges and dangers to this profession. But that's exactly why I'm serious about everything I'm saying. I've been in almost thirty years and I still love it. The longer I stay the more I'm impressed by how most soldiers are good soldiers. Especially the quiet ones. You don't notice they're there most times, and you feel kind of surprised when you see one and you don't know who the guy is. But that just means he did his part, he caused no trouble, did what he was supposed to, and he's part of the reason the whole mission succeeded. I know if I look into it he's not that anonymous after all, I'll hear the good things. That kind of soldier, he doesn't talk or complain or make noise, he understands what he has to do, sucks it up, and does it."

Robert nodded. What the sergeant major had said made a lot of sense, small parts to a whole, things working to a higher purpose. He understood how important small details could be, even to a larger operation. Sometimes a small detail turned out to be the most important thing. Somewhere in there, he thought that maybe he could fit, even if he still wasn't sure if he was everything the sergeant major had attributed to him. But he did think, somehow, that maybe he should be. Maybe he could be.

He signed up for the Military Science courses, but as he went through ROTC he found liked it more and more. It was simple, straightforward, no wandering lectures and vague theories, but steps in a field manual, memorizing a few task numbers, actions through a series of events, motions that were instinctive and self-explanatory. It was handy, useful knowledge, and successful application was appreciated and lauded.

Students were not simply students either. There was an expected standard of conduct, an etiquette, an attitude, and bearing that cultivated respect throughout the organization. Cadets addressed each other properly, knew that orders were meant to be followed, exercised the proper courtesy where it was due, and maintained it even if circumstances were trying. Within ROTC, the cadre made it clear there was behavior that was preferred and behavior that would not be tolerated, and serious students made sure to conduct themselves well. Robert had noticed it when he'd first come into the organization, the refreshing professionalism among a backdrop of a debauched campus life near experimenters and thrill-seekers. It was nice to find a basin of calm, a cultivation and maintenance of common decency. The standard was set down clearly, the steps on how to meet the standard was laid out as explicitly. All someone had to do was simply knuckle down. ROTC appreciated effort.

But despite the integrity of ROTC as an organization, some cadets still slipped through the cracks, and they tended to be the SMPs. Robert Goodman's dislike of them was not unjustified. The one area where Robert had initially struggled most with was the physical regimen. He had started out with nearly no strength and no stamina. He hated being the last one lagging during the runs, trailing after all the females, he had hated being the one who couldn't do a proper pushup for three months, or a pull-up for six. The first time he'd gone into a weight room and tried his hand at the bench press, he could hardly lift ninety-five pounds for one repetition. It was then that he first met a group of SMPs. Most were students of a different college who carpoled together to Cal's ROTC program since their own school didn't have one. A few of the SMPs were even from the same local unit. The group had raised a ruckus when they saw him struggling with the bar,

gathering around to watch him as he puffed and trembled, red-faced and horrified. One of them had been spotting him, and after laughing at the struggle, gripped the barbell and curled the weight above Robert's head.

Robert didn't understand why the Army had taken people like the SMP cadets in the first place, what they even did during their prior service. He supposed that with their units, during their active duty they must have taken on some responsibilities, fulfilled obligations of some sort, but for ROTC they insisted on doing the bare minimum. They preened and paraded, going on and on about family in the military, deployments and combat patches, standard operating procedures they never followed, but during class and leadership labs they shook their heads and said they'd already done that in Basic.

They confidently broke rules and protocols, snubbed ROTC regulations, and were inconsistent, itinerant participants. But they weren't even all that proficient in the Army smart book skills. They needed reminders on land navigation, squad tactics, hand signals, first aid, and some barely passed marksmanship. A surprising number weren't all that physically fit even, failing the PT tests, not showing up to the morning workouts.

But despite these technical shortcomings, they bragged. They made vulgar comments and jokes, and they were never short on the complaining or the criticism. ROTC didn't do things right, it was cakewalk, they'd done that in Basic, they'd done this in Iraq, officers had it easy. They hadn't liked Robert much either, saying he was too light, too long, wasn't trying hard enough.

But Robert had kept his mouth shut even when they didn't. He wasn't sure how he did it, and he wasn't even sure why, except that he found a strange kind of joy in defying the SMPs. Despite finishing last in a run or barely eeking out a sit-up, he felt

some strained pleasure along with his exhaustion in simply hanging on. They asked if he'd quit mid-semester. He hadn't. They made wisecracks about his run time, and kept taunting that in the end he wouldn't be able to stick it out. But he had.

He had enjoyed looking in their faces whenever he made it, he had liked how they grew quieter about their wisecracks and taunts, and that over time he began to notice where they failed despite their prior experience, when they couldn't calculate an azimuth correctly, when they mixed up a set of procedures in determining how to evaluate a casualty. When presentations and briefings made them stutter or falter, when they couldn't remember dates in military history or memorize the Soldier's Creed or the Warrior Ethos.

Robert had watched the sergeant major at those times, wondering whether he really felt that most soldiers were good soldiers, but the sergeant major, along with the rest of the cadre, bore the SMPs with a mystifying good-humor. They didn't seem to mind their informal modes of speech and action, they joked back even. "They're not bad soldiers at all," the sergeant major had even said when Robert had cautiously asked what he thought of some of them. "But this might not be the place for them, and that's all right. They served in their capacity."

It was a relaxed view, but the sergeant major didn't have to listen to them as consistently as he did. Still Robert tried to take his superior's perspective. It did make it easier to bear SMPs if he simply thought of them as temporary members of ROTC, and as his first year progressed he found that most of them really were. It was not without some satisfaction when he noticed they really were petering out. These same cadets with their loud mouths and sporadic attendance, who couldn't keep up in battalion runs, failed

tests, began to altogether quit, complaining how ROTC was “ate-up.” Despite whatever they’d gone through as enlisted men, they simply didn’t last in ROTC, that little program none of them considered the real Army anyway.

“What makes an enlisted man and what makes an officer can be radically different,” the sergeant major told Robert during his second year. By then, all the swaggering SMPs Robert met as a freshman had dropped out. “And how you do in the Army can depend. Someone joins and wants to make himself into something better, the Army’ll help him do that. Someone joins and decides he’s just going to get by, he’ll get by. You come in the way you are, and all the Army does is reveal your character. You don’t want to put any effort in? Not too much can be forced out of you, and yeah, you probably won’t be much. You want to be more, you can. You see, right? You’re the only one who can stop yourself.”

That was one lesson that Robert was certain he knew. He had started knowing nothing about the military, but he had survived the discipline and rigor. He’d never gone through BCT, but he’d done the ruck marches without falling out, had slowly worked himself up from barely meeting the physical standards to exceeding them, and had earned his commission in every sense of the word. It hadn’t been easy, his grades had suffered at times as his responsibilities grew, but he had done it, he had struggled, adapted, and weathered through. In the end, he was the one who had staying power. It was his slow but steady triumph.

Unfortunately, even in ROTC achievements of this sort were not widely recognized. SMP cadets still got more attention than they deserved, and unfortunately, Brandon Li was one SMP who was frustratingly permanent. Over first two months of the

semester, Robert rarely saw Cadet Li though he knew he was there. It was not completely on purpose. Robert was busy; there was TA-50 to inventory, other supply issues and paperwork to clear up, instructions, orders, and schedules from the cadre, and assorted logistical details to hash out between equipment for labs and classes, supervision and training of the MS-IIIs so they would take over ROTC's management their final year, as well as the regular workload of college courses. Robert was graduating and commissioning, there were details and paperwork for both events.

There was no reason to focus on Cadet Li, positively or negatively. They were in two completely different spheres, and he preferred it that way. He wished there was greater distance between them in fact. There were still the brief glimpses in the hall, the early mornings where he wished a few more cadets would show up, and Brandon Li's name came up more commonly than any other MS-II's. The cadre, especially the NCOs, already had their penchant for prior service soldiers. In meetings and conversations with cadre members Robert was forced to hear how Brandon was an outstanding soldier, was pulled out of him that he was a sergeant, an NCO too, in a leadership position already, in the Transportation branch, a dangerous, frequently attacked branch. That he didn't even have to be in ROTC till his junior year but there he was being gung-ho, that he was helping other MS-II's and even some of the MS-III's with their PT and smart book skills, that he had a great attitude and was a hard worker, that he'd be put in for a scholarship and for a slot for Airborne school.

Other cadets also talked about Li, how humble he was, how low-key but reliable. How he didn't brag about his experience, never talked about his deployment in fact, and only provided extra guidance or input when he was asked to. Even Robert's class, with

the exception of himself, seemed to like Brandon Li. “He is hilarious,” a MS-IV once said during an in-door PT session. He raised his voice. “Aren’t you, Li?”

At the end of the gymnasium, Li yelled back. “What?”

“You’ve got bite!”

“Like a dog, or like a spicy root beer?”

“Like a gator!” Another cadet yelled.

Robert didn’t think Li was funny. But what was especially frustrating was when Brandon Li was compared to him

“Hey,” a different MS-IV had once said. “You know on the last PT test, Li got something like a 10:30 run? Isn’t that what you got?”

Robert’s own score was only two seconds faster. But their pushup and sit up numbers were also remarkably close. Li had done 67 pushups in two minutes, one pushup more than Robert had, and 72 sit-ups, three less than Robert. People within the battalion mentioned how Li could do other things a lot like Robert did, that they both had that quiet but ambitious attitude. Good work ethic.

In those moments, Robert could not help the twinge of irritation inside his skull. The praise and the comparisons weren’t fair. Li had an advantage, his struggle was not the same as Robert’s, the challenge was less. Army training came easier to Li because he’d gone through the training before. He retained things a little better than some SMPs, but that didn’t mean he warranted the amount of acclaim he was getting. But Robert remembered to keep his mouth shut.

The brief exchange their first meeting had been more than enough for Robert. Cadet Li had already revealed himself as a variation of an old type. So he had a higher

level of technical proficiency, so he managed to maintain a more pleasant veneer; that was what a prior service soldier was supposed to do in the first place. But that didn't mean that he was truly the wonder that the whole battalion seemed to think he was, they weren't even that far into the semester yet. A cadet's true character would eventually come out, it always did.

In the meantime, Robert tried to maintain his composure. There were other things to consider, there was always a myriad of things to do. He continued to ignore the latest SMP cadet, through various PT sessions, courses, and labs, quite thankful that there was little to no opportunity for MS-II's and MS-IV's to personally interact. Brandon Li seemed to return the favor. In any case, there were no more dubious comments between them. They didn't exchange any words at all.

Chapter 3

That could have been the start and end of Robert Goodman's acquaintance with Brandon Li. However, that February, as part of the New Cadet Orientation Capstone exercise, the first and second year cadets were given the option to go through the obstacle course at Camp Parks. It was a familiar base to Robert, all the MS-IV's had gone through in years before, so it was expected that some of them were asked to help run and manage the course. Robert was asked to go. Of the new recruits that chose to participate in the confidence builder, Li was one.

The obstacle course was not overly large given that Camp Parks was a small base. Towers, rope nets, ladders, barricades, and wooden slats formed various constructions that needed to be climbed, scaled, tunneled, stacked, or leapt through. Teamwork was

necessary for a few of them, but for the most part an individual mainly needed gumption, the ability to forge ahead, not look down when up high, and not to back down when faced with the primary obstacle.

It was simply called “The Tough One.” It was composed of a series of ascending levels, starting with a rope climb to a platform about ten feet up. From there, a cadet needed to reach the next platform by crossing a path of wooden slats spaced a couple feet apart from each other. They were easy to cross once a cadet simply swallowed his doubts and started walking, getting into a rhythm as he realized that each wooden slat was spaced with equal distance. Some of the more height-conscious individuals might look down at the space below a little too fixedly, but the rhythm of their movements would bear them completely past the slats and into solid safety before nerves could have an effect. That second portion cleared, the next climb, another ten or fifteen feet, was simply up some metal bars to a third platform. Finally, a cadet then had to climb up an A-shaped ladder made up of thick logs, get onto the last platform, and now forty-feet up, descend a huge rope net. The constant incline followed by the sudden declination could be dizzying, but the course was straightforward.

That Saturday, when the cadets and cadre were all bussed over to the confidence builder, the participating cadets were divided into smaller groups of six or so, some of them heading for the various other obstacles on the range, while one especially nervous group had to overcome the “Tough One” first. Robert was assigned to that obstacle himself as a lookout and guide. He climbed up the various tiers of the “Tough One” and perched himself on the log at the top of the rope netting. Then he waited. The cadre overseeing this group, a major, was situated on the ground, watching his people struggle

to climb the dangling ropes. However, the first four who tried to climb all failed, one making it halfway, the other three hardly able to even go a few feet up. Even for first years, it was not an encouraging start. They were unable to catch on to the proper technique of using their legs along as support, and lacked the upper-body strength to pull up based solely on the muscles in their arms. The major, patience a bit short, announced that all the cadets would just start from the end of the obstacle, and climb the rope netting first.

The first cadet climbed over with little hesitation while Robert muttered encouragement. The next cadet came all the way to the top, and put both arms through the netting and as close to his chest as possible, his arms trembling as he clung to the rope. Once more Robert muttered encouragement, and told the cadet to simply climb down, which he did with careful gusto. The third cadet was Brandon Li.

Robert's lips pursed and tightened. Li climbed easily. Though for any other cadet Robert would have continued to encourage, he found that he only watched sullenly and silently. Li didn't seem to need much attention. Robert found his gaze wandering, he looked over to the side, at other obstacles down below, another small tower the cadets would have to climb, a series of walls that grew taller and taller, also for scaling, the yellow-green grass that grew in tufts around the obstacle courses, black tire mesh, finely shredded, under the obstacles themselves. A pale blue sky vaulted over them all, darkening to gray toward the horizon.

Robert noticed a slight bit of movement right below, Li was at the top already. "Now just haul yourself over," Robert said, trying to keep his voice even. Something prickled at the back of his neck. The constant reminders of how quickly achievements

came to some SMPs annoyed him. Li didn't even need to try. But as Robert stepped further into the wooden platform to give Li more room to clamber on, he saw the rope shudder. The uncomfortable simmer of his irritation chilled drastically, and as he stepped forward and looked over the ledge he saw Brandon lying forty feet below, spread-eagle on the ground. His helmet was no longer on his head and already a small crowd of cadets was hovering in a circle around him. Robert blinked.

Brandon Li had been right up top a moment ago; Robert had watched the climb up. Certainly, he'd looked away for a second, but only a second. The major was yelling at someone to get the commander and to call an ambulance. Robert blinked again. Had Brandon Li even screamed, or hollered, or made some kind of noise? Had he somehow fallen in perfect silence? It was still remarkably quiet.

The next few minutes passed with a nightmarish mix of frenzy and motionlessness. Robert didn't know how or when he climbed down the obstacle, but he soon found himself standing right outside the circle about Brandon. Someone had taken Brandon's boots off and placed them to either side of his head and someone else was squeezing his toes and asking if he could feel anything.

Robert wasn't sure how Li was, but he wasn't doing well himself. He heard in bits and fragments, voices traveling through a thick distance, and his movements were cumbersomely large and clumsy, strides that could cover leagues only actually taking a few steps. Somewhere in the back of his mind he realized that everyone was acting very practically and well. No mass hysteria, very astute, safe actions to ensure Li's welfare and comfort, all the proper authorities being called upon. But even those thoughts came from some foggy distance. The person currently standing watching was not really himself.

Certainly Robert Goodman would understand what was happening, would have been spurred to take some action himself, but this foreign entity knew nothing of that. It simply watched. Stupidly, amazedly, it did nothing.

The major, however, noted that all that could be done for Brandon had been done. Looking about him for the approach of the commander, he nervously asked one of the MS-III cadets to approach and go through the steps of “How to Evaluate a Casualty,” Task 081-831-1000 from the Army’s Common Tasks Manual. It was time to turn a disaster into a learning situation.

Brandon Li offered no protest though it seemed he could make some half-hearted replies if directly spoken to, and he made a very convincing casualty, lying as still and pale as he was. The MS-III glanced at the body of Robert Goodman as though for help, and though somewhere in the fog Robert Goodman wondered if this was exactly appropriate—they’d already gone through the steps preliminarily anyway, the steps were instinctual in a large sense, and this wasn’t a combat situation, health professionals were on the way, they could talk more in-depth about casualty evaluation once Li was evacuated—but the other Goodman remained quiet.

The cadet started reciting the steps with a few corrections and add-ons by the major all while trying to fix his stare on the major and not Li. In order of importance, one must check for responsiveness, breathing, bleeding, shock, fractures, burns, head injuries, and seek medical aid. The major nodded. Very good. It was time for the next cadet, a newer cadet to list the steps.

The commander had arrived and was standing off to the side. They had already checked Li’s eyes for uneven pupils, it didn’t look like there was any head trauma. He

was still lying there quietly. “Maybe he didn’t break anything,” she said. Nobody answered. The latest cadet was still stuttering through the Evaluate Casualty steps despite having just heard them.

“You’re looking good, Li,” the commander said, but she didn’t come any closer to the prone figure. He may have murmured something in response, his lips moved. “It’s all the muscle on your body,” the commander continued. “Holds all your bones together. Fitness has some advantages. Good thing you were wearing the Kevlar too.” She looked around to the left and right. Li wasn’t currently wearing his Kevlar.

“It flew off his head after he hit the ground,” the major said. “Chin strap probably just snapped. You know how it is, ma’am.”

“Oh,” the commander said.

“How do I check for bleeding again?” the hassled cadet said, his eyes round.

“Usually you just look,” another cadet volunteered. “And you also put your hands under his uniform and then take them out in case the bleeding’s completely out of sight.”

“But don’t move him,” the major said. “In case he’s got something broken. He probably doesn’t. But in case.”

The cadet held his hands out, taking a hesitant step closer to Li’s body. “Should I...?”

“Don’t touch him,” the major said a little sharply. “Just list the steps for now.”

The cadet stepped back again, his voice a bit high as he struggled to continue. Robert Goodman’s body swayed on its feet. This was how they waited for the ambulance.

Robert wasn't sure when time started to move again. Somehow, the rest of the cadets were sent home. The commander and the major had followed Li's ambulance to the hospital, and the sergeant major called a halt to all further obstacle course training.

"I think we've had enough for today," the sergeant major had said, his usual grin missing from his face. "I think all of us know what happened here, and plenty of us never took our eyes off Li in the first place. These kinds of things..." But the sergeant major only shook his head and said nothing else, motioning that they were all to load onto the bus. His eyes rolled slowly over the small crowd of cadets, and Robert realized, as the sergeant major's gaze met his and moved on, that he didn't know what had happened, he hadn't been watching, and perhaps everyone knew it. He was the lookout, he was the one most supposed to watch, and he didn't know what had happened. He didn't know.

The strange sense of distance, of disconnect, was momentarily touched by a frantic note of panic. The rest of the Robert's weekend was spent cycling between the two extremes of inertia and frantic restlessness. He had failed his mission, but still nobody spoke. Even the ride back to campus had been heavily quiet with slack-faced and round-eyed students looking out windows or down at their hands, and never at each other.

Robert had found himself sinking lower and lower in his seat, as he stared fixedly at a wrinkle in the seatback before him. After all the necessary speech, the only noise heard after the fall that day was the strained, animal yelp Li had made when the paramedics had rolled Li's body onto a backboard. It was a cry that had leapt and died in an instant, so sudden that Robert wasn't entirely sure if he remembered it, or imagined it.

When Monday came, Robert fought the urge to avoid ROTC altogether. No cadre had called him over the course of the weekend, and he spun wildly through worst case

scenarios. Did they blame him? The muscles in his arms and legs queasy and weak, the blood itching and sliding under his skin, his breath squeezing from clenched lungs, and his heart fidgeting in controlled tremors. He didn't know how he could defend himself. Would he have noticed, would he even have any possibility of helping the split-second where it all went wrong, even if he was watching? Especially when Li had been so stubbornly quiet, when nothing was said? Had Li asked for help at some critical moment? Should he have held out his hand? Had there even been any time? Even if he had been watching, was there all that much he could have done?

Was anything said?

But Robert forced himself to go to Hearst Gymnasium. He told himself there was no avoiding censure. No matter how he delayed he would eventually run into the consequences and it was better that he face them. It was important that he steady himself, maintain as composed a posture as possible.

When he arrived, he saw ROTC was wracked by a quiet fervor. For once all the offices had their doors tightly closed, almost as though all the cadre had simply avoided the office themselves. But when Robert moved closer to the commander's door he could hear muffled voices from inside. She was there, speaking low, low enough where Robert couldn't make out what she was saying, but her voice bristled with barely-reigned intensity.

When the commander emerged, the major, sergeant major, and other cadre members following, she was still talking. "The obstacle was designed to be approached from one direction as opposed to the other. It's a higher climb when you go by the rope net, is it significantly more tiring?" Her look was firmly fixed on the major, who ashen-

faced and frowning, clearly remembered he had redirected the cadets from the ten-foot side to the forty-foot side.

“No, it was never put out that the obstacle could only be approached from one way,” the major said, a little too soft.

“And that jamb at the very top, it sticks outward slightly, doesn’t it? Not exactly easy to clamber over once you’re at the top?”

“It’s not that hard either. There’s precedence, cadets have gone up from the other end before with no problems.”

“You’ve confirmed this?” the commander said, glaring just a little longer. “And you can put that into the report? It’s done, right?”

“It’s ready for brigade,” the major said quickly.

“It was an accident,” the commander said. “Clearly, it was an accident. You all saw what happened. Brigade should understand that, but the issue’s still Li. Do you think he’ll—” She stopped herself, noticing Robert standing at parade rest in the hall. Her lips twitched, something between a grimace and a smile forming there. “Mr. Goodman,” she said, and Robert braced himself. But the corners of her mouth turned upwards. “I suppose you’d like to know how Li is.”

She talked fast. She and the major had ridden the ambulance to the hospital, a good hospital, a very good hospital in Castro Valley. Li’s parents had driven up the very same day after having been called, and the cadre had gone back to the hospital every day since Li’s fall along with them and a flurry of friends and roommates who’d been contacted. Each day the medical authorities confirmed the same news. Li was good, very good, he hadn’t broken any arms or legs, it didn’t look like he had any mental

abnormalities, and his condition currently was stable. There was no risk of death. There had never been a risk of death.

Robert felt a lightness permeate his body. Until she said Li had fractured two vertebrae in his lumbar spine, one lung had collapsed from the impact, his spleen lacerated by the jolt.

Robert felt his mind go blank for a second. He blinked. The commander was still there, the major stood wan and haggard by her, and the sergeant major was glancing downwards. “It’s not at all as bad as it sounds. It’s not much damage,” the commander said. “For a forty-foot fall, that’s not much damage at all. He’s very lucky.” All the nurses had said so, and the doctors.

The neurosurgeon was operating tomorrow, a lumbar fusion involving the insertion of titanium rods and pins, because it had been a bad idea to operate immediately. There was too much swelling after a trauma of that sort, and an immediate surgery, especially when it wasn’t necessary, would only be complicated by enlarged tissues, strained and broken muscles, the blood and fluids leaking under the skin. Tomorrow would be better, enough time for the swelling to be minimal, for the body to have rebalanced itself enough to be cut into. The collapsed lung, the spleen, didn’t even need any attention. Li could be moved out of ICU after his back surgery and taken to a sister-hospital, one that specialized in rehabilitation, immediately after.

Robert could see Li then if he wanted to, once the surgery was done. “Any of the cadets who want to can. And all of us cadre are going too,” the commander said. “I know there must be a lot of concern at this point. But just let the cadets know he’s all right, he’s going to be fine.”

“Any—anything else I can do, ma’am?” Robert stammered. He always asked whenever he spoke with a cadre on an order of business, but it was more than habit that prompted him this time. He had to get the question out, put himself under her direct scrutiny.

“I’m glad you asked,” the commander said. “Yes, actually, there are a couple of things we need to discuss.” Robert stiffened. He wasn’t going to balk, he wasn’t going to try and avoid what was coming. He had failed at Camp Parks and he was prepared to face his sentence. He would face it, and they could all move on from there. He’d do better next time.

“Most of this you couldn’t be involved with,” the commander said, breaking into Robert’s thoughts. “And most of this is handled anyway. We’ve already filed the insurance claim. His parents go back down after tomorrow since there’s really nothing more they can do, and I’ll personally keep in contact with them. But we’ve got an FTX coming up, and it’s not easy following up with all Li’s roommates and friends. They’ll want to continue seeing him I assume, and even some of the cadets may want to visit on a recurring basis until he’s out of the hospital. Someone’s got to inform his professors about what’s happened too. He might have to withdraw this semester, but he shouldn’t be failed. If you could handle all those specifics, it would be a huge relief.”

The commander leaned her chin into her hand, pausing a moment. “Otherwise, just what I said before. Keep the cadets informed and try to run business as usual as much as possible. Keep everyone’s spirits up. Li will be fine. And thank you, Mr. Goodman.”

She went back into her office and closed the door. The other cadre likewise moved toward their respective offices, the sergeant major flashing a grateful smile as he passed by. “You’re on top of it, aren’t you?” he said. Robert barely kept from cringing.

But at the very least, Robert knew his assigned tasks. He could plan his next steps from there, how he should further manage his time. Most of the next week was spent in a flurry of data gathering and phone calls and emails. He looked up information on Li, the professors, the emergency contacts, the roommates, dutifully sent them emails, and then he went through ROTC’s member listing, getting more email addresses and phone numbers together, looking over the ROTC calendar, his own personal calendar, and made careful spreadsheets. When cadets came by, either of their own volition or because they were redirected by beleaguered cadre, Robert used to chance to update his roster, confirm contact information, and establish a hospital visitation schedule for Li. Two of the cadets even had access to their parents’ vans, a few others volunteered their cars, another said he could borrow a vehicle from a friend. Cadets were quite willing to take a look at Li, and agreed to meet the time and date Robert specified, though a few mentioned they would have to skip a class to make it. Focusing on these particulars, things didn’t seem so bad.

Robert appreciated details. They were the slow, steady means he made any progress, the buildup and basis to something better. The situation could be contained, studied, analyzed, and improved. The activity itself kept him from having to deal too long with cadet questions as well, the constant barrage, especially that first day, of questions about how Li was, and what exactly it was that happened.

Robert recited the commander’s brief, skimming and cutting a few details, but otherwise redirecting cadets to the question of whether they wanted to visit Li once the

surgery was done. Li was fine, he kept having to say, it had been an accident. An accident. A serious accident, but Li would be fine.

Most didn't ask anything more, and Robert could get back to his own work, all the details, the responsibilities that filled a life. He could read ahead for his classes and his time outside of ROTC was suddenly spent buried in schoolwork, he found himself ahead in all his readings, finished any assignments and homework that he knew would be due ahead of time due to a syllabus, wrote essays and responses in anticipation of assignments rumored for the future, and regretted that he hadn't taken a more challenging course load for his final semester. He began noticing that he was, strangely, too far ahead. Material was being covered that he recalled reading ages ago, and hearing the information again was not only tedious but disorienting. But he didn't allow himself to slacken or make excuses, he kept forging ahead.

Even when there was nothing pressing at ROTC there were a slew of things to do. He checked and rechecked arrangements for upcoming events, reviewed the smart books and field manuals, looked up handbooks on the signal branch itself, and simply exercised. He hit the gym after the PT runs, he ran after PT when it involved strength-training. His memorization of facts, figures, and tasks was at a newfound high, he could practically recite word for word from the smart manual, all the Drill and Ceremonies, Squad Tactics, Land Navigation, and it was getting on his nerves as never before how MS-I, II's, III's, and even a few of his fellow MS-IV's couldn't so much as get all the steps of How to Evaluate a Casualty right.

He made sure to get everything necessary handled so nothing would be dropped. So if people would only do what they were supposed to, nothing would go wrong. The

other MS-IVs and MS-IIIs had all been so relieved at how little they had to do. They thanked him for updated rosters and organized bookshelves. That the supplies and tasks for the Spring FTX in April were all coordinated, lodging and kine for three days arranged, contacts for Fort Hunter-Liggett, and other participating ROTC battalions ascertained. Each squad leader was to continue prepping their assigned squad, leadership labs were mainly review for the field training events. Business was as usual, it was even better than usual because he knew Li had caused extra duties for the cadre and cadets and Robert had wanted to facilitate the fulfillment of all functions, conventional and otherwise.

Still, for that first day after the accident, there was a distracting amount of human interaction. The cadets kept chattering instead of focusing. “Forty feet?” said one of the cadets who’d been there, looking too long at Robert. “That’s like four stories, isn’t it?”

Robert wasn’t sure that that was precisely right. It could have been less. He thought he’d remembered the sergeant major talking to him about the obstacle before, in previous years at Camp Parks where nothing had gone wrong. The sergeant major simply congratulated cadets for conquering their fears. He’d mentioned that the obstacle was *around* forty feet. The number was an estimate. “The exact number may be closer to thirty-five feet, maybe even thirty-four.” Robert had said.

“Does that matter when you’re falling?” the cadet asked.

Another cadet talked about the strange yelp Li had made when he got into the ambulance. “It was just... just terrible,” she said. “He’s really all right?”

Robert had felt the little hairs on his nape perk. “Did he yell out when he fell?” Robert blurted. “Did you all hear that?”

The cadets looked at him soundlessly. “That’s a weird question,” one of them finally muttered.

Robert was more than happy to leave Hearst Gymnasium that first Monday after the accident. He already knew that from then on, he would have to keep busier to avoid those strange moments, the silent faces. There was no point in wondering about the comments the cadets made, their looks, their pauses between words, the hints they may have been making, the accusations they didn’t. Of the sky he saw before he realized Li had fallen. That he had been in the best position to notice any signs of distress, but didn’t.

As he moved toward the door though, he noticed the major standing outside his office talking to an SMP cadet, an MS-I with attendance issues, a bit of a rebellious streak, one that had signed up to go Camp Parks but hadn’t. Yet that SMP talked loudly about the accident.

“That’s what the guy up top’s supposed to do,” he was saying. Even when he caught sight of Robert, his voice and attitude didn’t change. “You were supposed to grab Li.”

The major gave Robert a smile, but the crinkles by his eyes and the lines around his mouth were too deep, the lines extended too far. He was forcing himself. “Ah, Mr. Goodman,” he said. “I was just reexamining my report and I just wanted to confirm something given your position.”

Robert felt the blood draining from his face, until he was nearly as pale as the still-smiling major. He tried to calm himself down, it was impossible, after all, that the cadre would simply forget his position. But this wasn’t quite how he wanted to meet his

punishment, with a smug-looking, baby-faced SMP cadet looking on. But the major didn't give the SMP another look.

"I checked myself but I just wanted to make sure. The rope net was in working order, wasn't it? No indication of equipment failure, foul play, anything of concern?"

"No," Robert said. Everything had looked fine, whenever he'd been looking, things had looked fine.

"That's what I thought," the major said, clasping his hands together. He glanced at the SMP cadet. "Nothing was missed, it's unfortunate but... this just happened. We did everything within our power, everything possible, to ensure that the obstacle course would be safe. Do you understand? Li's fall was very sudden, and especially if you were trying to make room for someone to clamber up, there's nothing you can really do in a split second."

The SMP cadet's eyes were bugging out, but Robert hung onto the words. He wasn't entirely sure if the major was defending him or not, Robert still remembered clearly how the commander had glared earlier, about how the major had wanted the obstacle course done backwards. But the reassurance, what the major was saying, it was true. Robert had moved aside. "If I could have helped him somehow, I would," Robert said. It wasn't all his fault. The major seemed to see that, maybe he understood best of all.

"Whatever," the SMP cadet scowled, but he backed down. "If I was there, just at the bottom, I would have tried to catch him, that's all I'm saying." He turned quickly and strode away.

"Maybe he would, if he showed up to any of the exercises," the major said, watching the SMP leave. "But obviously that wouldn't have turned out any better."

It seemed almost as though the major wasn't directly talking to Goodman. His voice was soft, contemplative, and he seemed to have even forgotten momentarily that Goodman was there. It was more as though the major spoke to reassure himself.

"Of course," the major continued, straightening slightly and turning back toward Robert, "you always wonder in retrospect if you could've done better, done something differently, but how could you know? Of course you'd feel guilty, that's natural. But there's no point in assigning blame, in deciding how much guilt one person should have, how much another should. It's an accident. Nobody's at fault."

Was there some ulterior message to the major's words, something below his proclamation that they were all innocent? Goodman suddenly felt nervous despite how much sense the words made. The major kept glancing between the door and Goodman, never keeping a steady gaze, ready it seemed, to slip away at a moment's notice. Goodman wasn't sure where the major had been when Li had fallen, whether he had witnessed firsthand the whole accident, or whether he'd been overseeing a different portion of the obstacle. Suddenly Goodman couldn't stand the shift of the major's eyes, the stretched smile, the hands tightly grasped together. Did the major know he'd looked away? But he didn't ask.

"Nobody's at fault," the major said again, and he went still, no more fidgeting or shifty eyes, his focus completely on Goodman. "All right?"

Goodman felt himself trying to find words, but he wasn't sure what he was agreeing to. It seemed neither of them had been in the right place at the right time, neither of them had made the best of decisions, but that in the end, neither of them was at fault

either. That could have been true, but it surprised Goodman to hear the thought voiced. It was disturbing.

“Right,” Robert found himself saying. There was no hostile intention, and there was no outright negligence, they had been careful, and Li had really given them no reason to worry beforehand. That was the very definition of an accident. One moment of looking away, that was nothing. It was about as worthy of condemnation as telling the cadets to do an obstacle course from the other end. Under normal circumstances, most of the time, it wouldn’t have mattered. One couldn’t plan for everything.

The major nodded, his smile relaxing, and the tension going from his face. The SMP was wrong, he didn’t know the circumstances. There had been no one to blame, no perpetrator, no criminal. Just a victim.

Chapter 5

The dreaded first visit to the rehabilitation hospital finally came. At first, it didn’t seem like it would be too bad. The convoy only took thirty minutes. Robert drove his own car, the lead vehicle, with two other silent cadets inside, while two vans filled with more cadets followed. They rambled through the narrow Berkeley streets onto the freeway, and before long found themselves rolling down a residential area with wide, smoothly paved roads. Robert felt slightly cheered at the sight of the rehabilitation hospital, smaller than he had expected, but charming with brick walls and a white roof. There was a green lawn out front, shrubbery near the entrance, and the automatic glass doors opened smoothly when they approached. It really was a good hospital, Robert thought. The commander had been right. This was the kind of place where the staff paid

attention and took special care. Li was in good hands, he would be better soon, there was no need to worry.

The inside of the hospital seemed to corroborate first impressions. The halls were spacious and light, the linoleum floors shining under the fluorescent ceiling. But as Robert briefly explained his group's purpose to the nurses at the front desk he noticed that all the rooms lining the hall had open doors and their inpatients peeking outwards. They were all elderly women and men, some hunched in wheelchairs or over walkers, others standing with white hair and bony hands against the doorway, all of them with wide eyes looking. The cadets did garner attention. There were fourteen of them, a larger group than this hospital typically received, and a couple of the MS-IIs and MS-IIIs were still in uniform due to color guard training right before their scheduled departure.

A few inpatients smiled when Robert glanced over, but most had no change of expression. The nurse who stood up to lead them to Li's room grinned. "It's almost dinner time," she said by way of explanation. "So the patients are getting ready to go over to the cafeteria."

"Is this a bad time?" Robert asked. "We don't want to crowd anyone."

"Oh, no," the nurse said. "Brandon's just out of surgery so doctor's orders are that he can't eat until tomorrow. He's still groggy, so you won't be able to stay long, but you can see for yourselves he's on the up and up."

There was nothing wrong with the room either. It was also clean, with large windows in its walls looking out to some more shrubbery. It was also large, with two empty beds at two of the corners, a sleeping old man in the third, and Brandon Li in the corner across from him. A wheelchair was positioned at the foot of his bed with two long,

plastic pieces, torso-sized, placed in the seat. The major and commander were in the act of walking back into the hall with a middle-aged couple who could only be Brandon's parents.

“And here's the troops,” the commander said motioning toward them to come closer. “He has many friends in ROTC, as you see.” Brandon Li's parents made small, stiff smiles. The father, a man whose closed features showed clearly in the son, muttered a low “Thank you.” Li's mother had surprisingly large damp eyes that glanced back and forth quickly, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she leaned a little closer to the door, and Robert could see how stretched and thin her skin was, fragile, like something easily torn.

“The surgeon was just here too. He was very pleased, everything went smoothly and Brandon should make a full recovery,” the commander said. “He's a little groggy now, but he'll only get better. Now we'll let you chat with him, but Mr. and Mrs. Li do need to get going.”

Robert wasn't sure if groggy quite described the invalid. Brandon Li looked like a shred of himself, shadows in his cheeks and under his eyes, his shoulders and chest thinner, enmeshed in white sheets and blankets, IV tubes and monitors to the side. His eyes cleared slightly when he saw them approach, a slight gleam of recognition.

“You look good,” one of the cadets ventured. “Heard the surgery went all right?”

“Yeah,” Brandon Li said, his voice trailing, slow and laborious, like he couldn't get quite enough air.

“What’s that?” the same cadet said, pointing to the white plastic pieces in the wheelchair. “Those yours?” They looked like two parts of an insect’s shell, shiny, sleek, and hard, an exoskeleton with white Velcro straps.

“Back brace,” Brandon said. One of his hands raised slightly, then fell back down. “Keep straight, no twisting.”

“Ah,” the cadet said, frowning slightly before smiling again. “They made that pretty fast, in like three days? Is it custom or something? How’d they know it’d fit you alright?”

“Yeah, custom-made. Made me try it on before I came over here. And stand.”

“You stood up?”

“No, tried. Fell.”

“They caught you though?”

“Yeah.”

“I guess that’s good. It must mean you’re not too bad off, if they thought you might stand right after surgery.”

“Right.”

There was a long pause as the one cadet looked around him, waiting for someone else to take over.

“So you’ll look like a Ninja turtle?” a second cadet finally said.

“Yeah,” Brandon said.

A few members of the group laughed. Brandon did have something like a smile on his face. But the stay didn’t last much longer. It was obvious the effort Brandon was

making, even to turn his head toward a speaker, and some of the cadets kept looking at the sleeping old man across from Li's bed.

"The morphine," the nurse confided as they filed out. But as Robert turned to leave it seemed Li's eyes hung on him a few seconds longer than anyone else. Replete on morphine or not, Li probably remembered where Robert was when he fell. The thought caused a small, unpleasant jolt.

It wasn't as though Robert couldn't inure himself to distasteful tasks. As the week continued onward he maintained his frenetic pace, staying abreast of all his responsibilities, the schedules, the arrangements, the details. Staying so busy was taking its toll. He hadn't noticed before, but now the organization of ROTC seemed inept, too complacent. He noticed when cadets and even the cadre weren't following SOPs, leaving an office open, empty, and unguarded, hair that strayed below the collar, an off-center patch, marks on inventory lists that had gone without physical inspection, signed memos that hadn't been read first. A parade of small things no one was doing.

He could tolerate to an extent, simply tell himself to refocus, but as the week dragged on, the hospital visits remained dreadful. Li's color was successively getting better, but there was little variation on what people wanted to chat about, how horrible the accident had sounded, how the surgery went, how well Li was doing, how well he looked, the back brace and the wheelchair. Li was able to speak in longer sentences now, answer those same questions with a little more enthusiasm. Robert always hung back, staying closer to the door, further from the hospital bed, and Brandon Li didn't address him until the end of that first week.

“It’s weird,” a cadet had said. “Most people break an arm or a leg, but you went straight for the big time, went ahead and broke your back. Most people don’t do that. Unless they’re old, I guess, my grandma broke her hip a year back from a fall.”

Robert risked a pained glance at the gleefully oblivious cadet. He wondered if this particular student hadn’t noticed that Li really was the youngest person at the rehabilitation hospital. Situation awareness was a common military tenet.

Li’s flat expression hadn’t changed. “Yep, getting a taste of the future here. Eating jello cups and not being able to go to the bathroom. At least I can hold it, some of these guys, they can’t control their bowels, so they just soil themselves without even knowing it. At least I’ve graduated to solid food though.”

The cadets groaned and laughed. “But you crap yourself?” one of them joked. Robert found himself rolling his eyes. If the conversation took much longer he would walk back to the lobby.

“They thought I might have that problem because of the broken back,” Li said. “First week, suppositories. Just stuck it right in there and then it all explodes down.” More than a few cadets grimaced, but Li didn’t seem at all embarrassed about sharing. “What? You guys asked for it! That happens sometimes when the spinal cord’s injured. Nerve damage. Had to learn all about it now that I have one.”

“But you don’t have that? You’re okay?”

“Not bad. I still can’t go as fast as some of the eighty year olds in wheelchairs. I need more PT I guess.”

“You can do PT?”

“That stands for Physical Therapy in a hospital.”

“No kidding!”

An odd looking curve touched on Li’s lips. “Yeah, surprised me too.”

“You’re getting better fast,” the cadet said. “Man, you’re really pretty lucky.”

“Yeah, I’m lucky,” Li said. “I’ve been hearing about that, everyone’s been telling me. I’m really very lucky. I agree. Nothing to complain about here, like hitting the jackpot, I’m lucky.”

“I mean, not like that,” it was the cadet whose face was reddening this time. “I mean that you didn’t fall on your head or break your neck. You’re not paralyzed or dead. I mean.”

“That would be worse. It could always be worse. It was that tire mesh, extra padding or something, absolutely lucky that was there.”

“But I mean—”

“I know what you mean,” Li said. “I’m just goofing off here. I know what you mean.”

Robert tried to avoid looking at the patient, fixing his stare on the clock hanging on the wall behind Li’s bed. He wondered how long Li was going to be in the hospital before going home already, how far in advance he should make the visiting schedule, how much longer he had to keep coming back here. He didn’t like how long each visit always took, even if it was only fifteen minutes by the watch. There were too many seconds, minutes, hours even in the shortest stretch of time.

“Mr. Goodman,” Brandon suddenly said, looking up with something like a smile, just as the group of them was leaving.

Robert tried to smile back. “Mr. Li.”

“You come here a lot.”

There was no particular accusation to the words, but there was no gratefulness in them either. It was a statement of fact. Robert supposed he did actually come quite a bit to the hospital. Li was smiling politely, and Robert didn't know what exactly was behind the smile. He didn't know if he wanted to find out.

Perhaps Li had simply noticed that his visitors were growing sparser in number. There had been enthusiastic volunteers to see Li at first certainly, and everybody thought someone should keep visiting as well. It was just that nobody wanted to actually do it. The commander and the rest of the cadre had their hands full. They couldn't go visit Li themselves as much as they wanted to due to all the paperwork and briefs brigade was demanding about the accident, and it had just turned from February to March, which meant that there was a lot of preparation and paperwork to be done so the MS-IIIs would succeed during the upcoming Spring FTX, and LDAC that summer. Robert understood how important that was, didn't he? And besides, Li would probably prefer to see people his own age, there was more for him to talk about that way.

But the cadets themselves were balking. Despite sign-up sheets and verbal agreements, despite Robert arranging and ferrying any interested cadet, they were renegeing. After one week, cadets felt they'd already done their utmost. Robert had to bite his tongue whenever a cadet made an excuse, when they called to say they couldn't make a slot they'd signed up for, or when Robert called a cadet as a reminder only to find things had changed. Their battalion wasn't all that large, just roughly forty people, and only about twenty that showed regularly. But of those twenty there were few, even among MS-IIIs, who knew Brandon well enough to want to visit the hospital on a

recurring basis. All the cadets who had initially seemed so sympathetic were giving a flurry of excuses. The hospital was too far, they didn't want to get in the way of other visitors, midterms were coming up.

They were valid points, and Robert could see how convinced the cadets were by their own logic, but he could not be sympathetic. Cadets complained about tiny issues he knew they would easily overcome if they only wanted to. Midterms were no issue if you kept up with lectures and reading from the start instead of slackening or distracting yourself, travel even to Castro Valley was doable through public transit even if it did take longer, commitments meant you were all in. You didn't say you would do something unless you meant to do it.

Robert tried to explain this to the first few cadets, but it had taken so much time with little result. More than a few had pointed out that the other MS-IVs weren't making a burden of this the way he was. Those same MS-IVs said that if everyone was occupied then nobody should be forced, and besides, they were busy with the same things as well. There were no consequences for missing a hospital visit anyway, no danger of losing a commission, or getting a bad review, no punishment or rewards for going or not going. It was clear to Robert he wouldn't win.

But he had to continue to monitor Li. Robert couldn't see a way out of it. He didn't know what else he was supposed to do. No outright blame had been placed, but all responsibility and all liability had been slowly and steadily placed on him. He was supposed to make everything better without any hint how. The floundering was part of the process.

Everyone else was too busy to bother, too busy trying to find time, while for him it seemed no matter what he did, there was still more to do, and the more he did, the more time he gained. It might have been punishment, Robert decided, for looking away. He simply didn't know why Li was being punished as well. Quiet and unreadable as he was, understated and controlled, the sight of Goodman could only be tolerated so long, couldn't it? Robert could only hope that Li would be withdrawing from Cal soon so he could return home. He'd heard doctors talk about discharging Li back to his parents, and that given that he could get more physical therapy in his home city down in LA, he wouldn't have to stay much longer in Berkeley.

Robert hoped for sooner than later. Of course, it was never that simple. At the end of the first week, Robert found out that Li had no plans to withdraw for the semester. He meant to return to school.

Chapter 6

Robert first heard the news from the commander. She had gotten into the habit of asking Robert for news on Li's progress, but this time, Robert was taken by surprise. "Why isn't Li going home?" she'd demanded. "He has to stay a month in the hospital now that the doctors think he's going back to school. If he was just going home he'd be down south already. Why's he sticking around?"

Li had never mentioned any academic plans in his hearing. "I don't know," Robert said slowly. He found the fact off-putting himself. He had assumed that Li would go back to LA, and he apparently was not the only one.

“Maybe the fall rattled his head more than they thought. He can’t come back to school like that,” the commander muttered.

There was a rap on the door, and when Robert opened it, the sergeant major was standing there. “We’re ready for you in the conference room,” he said, looking at the commander.

“I’ll be in soon,” she said. “Mr. Goodman’s telling me about Brandon Li.”

“Is there some new development?” the sergeant major glanced at Robert. “Is he still doing all right?”

“He’s fine,” the commander said. “I’m just trying to get a better feel for his disposition.”

The sergeant major cracked a wide grin. “Because he wants to finish the semester out?”

“We’ll support him whatever his decision. But I’d like to know if there are any other motivations or expectations. It won’t be easy for him. I don’t want him to continuously run into difficulties and disappointments. He’ll already be staying in the hospital longer because of his plans, that won’t be conducive to him completing the semester either.”

“No, but he’s been studying in his free time over there. I guess he’s got a lot of it, all he does is read and prep for the midterms he missed.” The sergeant major gave Robert a knowing nod. “Li’s a tough guy, already got into contact with his professors about make-up work and alternative arrangements. I’m sure Mr. Goodman helped him out with that.”

Robert felt his face whitening. He had noticed books scattered about by Li's bed, but he'd thought they were more for entertainment than study. There were hardbound and paperback books in a lounge in the hospital, how was he supposed to know the texts hadn't come from there? And he hadn't written to Li's professors since the email informing them of the fall either.

"No, that wasn't me, sergeant major," Robert said. "Must've been his roommates." The sergeant major's eyebrows raised, the smile slipping off his face. It occurred to Robert that maybe he should have offered to personally visit the professors; it just hadn't occurred to him that he'd need to.

"So Li never mentioned his plans to you?" the commander asked.

"No, ma'am."

She sighed, shifting from one foot to the other. "I'll have to visit again sometime. There is something I've been wondering about though. How is Li's attitude these days? Does he seem at all distraught about what happened to him? And did he ever express...say anger of any sort?"

"No, he seemed all right," Robert said. He wondered if he should mention that he didn't much care for Li's sense of humor.

"All right," the commander said after a short pause. "There's no delicate way of putting this, but has Li talked about taking any kind of legal action against us? Issuing an official complaint? Against ROTC I mean. Has he mentioned that to you or any of the cadets?"

"Excuse me?"

"What I'm trying to ask," the commander said, "is whether you think he'll sue."

“I don’t really know, ma’am—”

“Li’s been in the Army awhile. He knows accidents happen,” the sergeant major interjected. “Whether training or in actual combat situations. He’s been deployed even, he knows how it is. He’s not angry, ma’am. We’ve all chatted with him, he’s staying positive, he really likes how often the cadets visit, he’s taking everything well all things considered.”

“Yes, well, at times it looks that way,” the commander said slowly. “We can head to the conference room, I’ll be right there. Just one more word with Mr. Goodman.”

Robert remained at attention, and the sergeant major, after tapping his fingers against the doorframe, closed the door quietly.

“Sergeant major’s got a high opinion of Li,” the commander said. “And so do I, but he’s a little hard to read. We’re taking a beating over here already from brigade, from our own side of the house. If this gets blown up publically, well, you know the political climate at this university. We can’t defuse a situation if we don’t know where the bomb might go off. Maybe there’s no bomb at all and I’m worrying over things I don’t have to bother with, but I just need to know. I’m sure he’ll be more honest with another student. Just find out if he plans to sue.”

It was yet another task, but this time, Robert couldn’t understand it. He didn’t know why he had to figure Li out on his own, or why, of all people, the commander thought he was the best person for the task. Each of the hospital visits had been awkward. The main advantage of having a group was that he personally didn’t have to talk to Li, and he didn’t know how to talk to Li anyway. There was something always behind the black glare of narrow eyes, and perhaps it was anger, but there was no certainty. It wasn’t

as though Robert didn't want to know, he simply had no desire to risk broaching the worst and most likely possibility. But he had to now. He had to find out.

Robert tried to stay positive about the subject. Obviously, if the commander was asking him, she thought he could handle it. On the surface, there was nothing to complain about. Other people weren't working with him as much as he expected, but his own life continued on its set track, classes and responsibilities fulfilled to an acceptable standard. It was only his piano playing that was suffering, and he'd never thought much about piano as anything other than a hobby anyway.

He was forced into it when he was younger, when his parents insisted he have some extracurricular. He'd only had lessons for one year, and intermittently at best, waffling between his own disinterest and his parents' greater concern for his academics. He'd returned to the piano after realizing he had a dearth of free time in college. His own lack as a musician had been clear enough when he could barely read notes, but he had realized, with some surprise, that there was something fascinating about music when it wasn't mandatory. He could only play simple pieces, and there were plenty of musical notations he couldn't interpret, so he played slowly, sometimes if he practiced long enough he could play it moderately, but never fast. He had no talent.

He knew this, but music was yet another thing that responded to persistence. He didn't have the best ear, he could be moved every now and then by the right cadence and cascade of notes in an orchestra, by professionals, or even from his own hand, but usually classical pieces faded into background noise. He liked some songs on the radio but had no favorites, not because there were too many great tunes to choose from, but because he heard and forgot.

Yet he liked being able to play. Though he didn't know what *moderato cantabile* meant, or what was required by squiggles over notes, he could still coax a tune out of the series of silent black notes printed on lined paper. Eventually he could piece together some kind of musical meaning, he could hear it, call it into being. And he was the one who did it, someone with no talent, no mastery, no true appreciation. He didn't exactly like music, he didn't think, but he liked the discipline it demanded, and the way it responded slightly, hesitatingly, but inexorably to tenacity. People, including his old piano teacher, had told him before that they didn't particularly care for the way he played, that it was accurate but mechanical, but Robert had been fine with that. Accuracy, accomplishment was all he needed. Skill was not always about passion or talent anyway.

Robert had always accepted that music was above him. The whole thing was beyond the physical world, it didn't quite exist in reality, and it seemed something akin to a miracle and a mystery that music was known at all. Robert had heard that composers did not so much as craft their masterpieces as discover them. Music and harmony were called from a different plane of existence. A composer somehow caught snatches of it, rendered it into notes and pauses. It was reconstituted, reproduced, brought out of air by instruments, strings, wood, or brass, before it faded back into the air. Most times, despite the inspiration of the composer, a melody was reproduced inadequately, falteringly, stunted by the shortcomings of its medium. Even success was ephemeral. The most beautiful strands of sound were poignant but brief, flitting into a bright being, and then gone and forgotten.

Robert had never thought he could love music for this reason. He didn't know how to dedicate to something that would never fully return to him, to know that there was

a point where effort was not enough. He had to be satisfied with what he had because there was no other option. There were other excuses he could lean on. He didn't own a piano but had to check one out at the Music Building for a half-hour at a time, playing was diverting, interesting, but not practically useful, and he'd never been thoroughly invested in music anyway. But how choppy his notes were, the awkwardness of pauses, and the constant mistakes in finger placement, in reading, in rhythm, were jarring reminders of how despite having struggled through years, he had nearly nothing to show for it. His progress was miniscule, disproportionate to the effort and time he expended. There was always something slightly off.

Music was beyond him, but he noticed with dismaying clarity just how far beyond it was. His own inadequacy was insurmountable, and the revelation was starkly frightening. He wished that he could change this somehow, either that he find some modicum of talent, some new threshold in musical ability, or that he simply could return to his old satisfaction with his level of ability, to see it simply as an exercise in diligence, a step toward a goal as opposed to a goal in and of itself. But he was distracted but so many other circumstances, other discords.

And it was all because of Li. Robert had been functioning just fine in his system before, one in which he was steadily progressing, in which he knew the steps, the order, the logic, and now suddenly all number of invariables had been thrown his way. He had to constantly reorganize, reconfigure, but he could do it. He could figure it out. Robert told himself to act engaged, to be interested. Even if he didn't want to be, he had to at least make attempts. False motivation was better than no motivation at all.

Chapter 7

By Thursday Robert had managed a group of three other cadets. The rest of the week looked empty as far as hospital visits went. Other non-committal MS-IVs were leading groups that probably weren't going, and Robert had already called all the cadets on his list to find a wide swath of uncertainty. The Thursday group itself had almost failed to coalesce. This was his one chance to get Li to reveal intentions.

During the car ride, Robert gave clear instructions to his cadets to try and go beyond the typical, superficial inquiries about his health, to instead, try and facilitate a real conversation about the future. Ask Li about his plans, what he was studying, what he was getting into, what he'd be doing once he was out of the hospital, if he was really going back to classes, if that meant he'd be returning to the Army, to ROTC, how he felt about those two organizations anyway. Robert kept his suggestions casual and deliberately left out the angle about finding signs of anger or litigation. The cadets didn't need to know, and frankly, he didn't want to tell them. Their questions would probably be more natural, less obvious if he allowed them to come out with their own topics anyway, especially so long as they kept to the track he'd outlined.

"Just try and keep him occupied," Robert said. At least the cadets seemed enthusiastic about his conversational topics. They were just as surprised as he had been at the news that Li wanted to come back to school.

When the four of them arrived, Li was sitting in the wheelchair with his back brace on. He did look like a turtle in a white shell. Robert took a quick glance at the inpatient's corner space, noticing immediately that the monitors and IVs were gone, replaced instead by a folded walker. There were books on the windowsill on a little end

table by the bed, ones he'd seen before without paying close attention, but looking at them directly he saw that they were thick, large books. One looked like a Statistics textbook due to the graph on the hardcover, another was a Norton Anthology. Robert tried not to glance too long at them. There had been large looking books in the hospital lounge, old books, thick books, hefty novels and the like. So he hadn't realized these were textbooks, he didn't know to watch for textbooks before.

"Hey," Brandon Li said. He wasn't looking at Robert but at the three other cadets who were clustered together, glancing at the books as well.

"Hey," they all said. "Hi."

"What are you studying here?" one said.

"Using the walker yet?" another said.

"You look really good," the third cadet said.

Li wheeled closer. "Just studying for a bunch of midterms. All prerequisite stuff. And I haven't really gone too far with the walker yet. The therapists get me back to the wheelchair pretty fast. And thanks," he said cocking his head at the final cadet. "I've been feeling all right."

"Cool," the cadet said. "So you'll be running in no time. Doing that eleven minute two-mile?"

Brandon Li's face reddened slightly. "Maybe," he said.

"It's crazy, you know?" the cadet continued, fingering the Norton Anthology. "If I was you, I wouldn't want to go back to school, I'd be all for taking it easy. You really like your classes?"

"No," Li said.

“Professors?”

“They’re all right, they’re working with me. That’s good.”

“Still sounds pretty tough,” another cadet said.

“Yeah,” the first cadet agreed. “Nothing in your way, huh? Are you coming back to ROTC too?”

Good, Robert thought. He couldn’t have orchestrated it better himself. The cadet was doing well, good questions spurred by genuine curiosity, and Li was responding with what seemed like honesty, if a little hesitance.

“Yeah. I already told sergeant major I’d do the MS-II midterm here if he wanted. Would make it easier when I get out of here for the other exams.”

“Goddamn...” the cadet said, shaking his head. He glanced at Robert. “Sorry, I mean, wow. That’s amazing. Like impressive, you know?”

Robert shrugged. Nothing had been achieved yet. It was one thing to have the purpose, another to have the will.

“Not really,” Li said. “I just don’t want to lose any more time.”

“Are you in a hurry? Want to graduate early or something?”

“I’m graduating late no matter what. I should be a junior already but I’m a sophomore.”

“What?” the cadet with the Norton nearly dropped the book. Robert blinked.

“I missed my first semester because I was in AIT, then a whole year because of the deployment, and another semester because we came back in the middle of November. Two years. And here I am.”

“Whoa,” a cadet said. “So you’ve only been in school for like five months so far?”

“Seven,” Li said. “I did summer session, wouldn’t be a sophomore otherwise. But I figure I’ve done enough withdrawing and delaying. Can’t help orders, but it’s starting to feel like I’m running out of time, you know? If I don’t keep moving I won’t get anywhere. So if I can go back, I think I should.”

Li’s elderly roommate shifted in his corner, coughing a bit, and Robert’s eyes fixed on him in surprise. He’d completely forgotten there was another inpatient.

“That’s cool,” the third cadet said. “I get it. That’s so ironic though. Going a whole year in Iraq without anything happening to you, and then just when you come back...”

“Kind of anticlimactic, right?” the first cadet said. “No cool war story.”

“Nope,” Li said, crossing his arms. “Hand slipped on rope during obstacle course, a basic training exercise I’d done before. Not very exciting.” Robert’s ears tingled and burned, but Li was still talking. “Not as good as fighting off hordes of terrorists while climbing a rope to an escape chopper, does it? No one even pushed me off or shot at me or something dramatic.” There was a short pause. Robert tried to find the clock in the room. Li was looking at him.

“But you’ve had your share of war stories.” the cadet with the Norton said suddenly. “This isn’t fazing you at all. Must have been hardcore in Iraq, so this is like nothing to you now, right?”

“No, man, I’ve got no good stories. I wasn’t doing much,” Li said. “It’s really not worth talking about. I told you before, it was a desk job.”

“Come on,” the cadet said. “I hear the Transportation Corp sees tons of action!”

“My unit was locked down though.”

“Don’t hold out,” the cadet said. “Even the bases get attacked, don’t they? Something must have happened.”

“Yeah, right,” Li said, his voice clipped.

“Weren’t you being shelled all the time?”

“All the time; and you get used to it.”

“No really, what were you doing?”

Li was still smiling cheerily. “Pretty much this,” he said, his eyes little curved arcs. “A lot of nothing. Except I could stand by myself.”

Robert looked back and forth between Li and the three cadets with the dread sense the situation was deteriorating. There had to be a way to salvage the conversation, keep Li talking, keep the spirits up. There was no sense in giving him any more provocations to sue.

“How are your parents?” Robert said before he knew it. Li straightened in his wheelchair, his eyes widening just slightly.

“They’re good,” Li said. “I mean, you know, they’re my parents, so they’re obsessing over nothing, but they’re good.”

Everyone in the room was now looking at Robert. This was the first time the cadet commander had contributed conversation. Robert could hardly believe it himself, he could feel his ears turning red, but there was no way he could retreat quietly now. He was being engaged, being proactive, he was interested. “Your mom,” Robert said quickly, “she’s all right?”

Li sank back into the wheelchair, another grin spreading across his face, somehow different from the one he had before. “Oh man,” he said. “You guys won’t believe this, but she’s furious.”

Robert’s throat tightened. “She is?”

“Yeah! She was about as close to yelling as you can get right after I got out of surgery. I was kind of out of it and all, but she just kept talking. Why wasn’t I more careful, didn’t I think I’d already worried her to death enough already, how could I do a thing like this to her? And I was half-conscious trying to at least nod.”

“Yelling?” one of the cadets said, grinning incredulously.

“Well, not full out. But she can make these faces and you get everything she’s feeling. It’s all in her eyes. She looks at you, and—she has big eyes, you know?”

Robert shifted from one leg to the other. He did know.

“Your mom blames you?” the cadet said, still incredulous.

“I know, right? Like I planned this out just to upset her! But yeah, slipped and fell at forty feet, kind of embarrassing. You can tell why my mom thinks I fail at life, right?”

“Your parents are weird.”

Robert cast an annoyed glance at the cadet. He almost considered using hand signals, some way to tell the cadet to stop talking if he couldn’t be respectful, but it seemed all too likely that the cadet wouldn’t understand the signals, but Li would. “Are they coming back sometime?” Robert asked instead.

“No, there’s really no point. My dad can’t afford to miss work, and my sister’s still in high school, so they can’t just leave her by herself all the time.”

“They can’t come back at all?”

“It’s a long drive.” Li looked down at his hands. “My dad’s partners with a Japanese guy for this gardening business. Mainly they move manure up people’s hills. The Japanese guy’s like twenty-years older than him though, so there’s not much business unless my dad’s helping out with the work and managing the other workers. It’s a hot job. And it smells.”

“He does this in LA?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s where you’re from, right?”

“Yeah, Alhambra. So my dad does jobs in the city, a lot of stuff in Monterey Park, Montebello a little, East LA, Rosemead, San Gabriel, and then San Marino and Pasadena too, the nice parts.”

“I’m from Pasadena,” Robert said. Most students at Cal had come up from Southern California, but the proximity of Li’s home to his still surprised him.

“Yeah?” Li cocked his head. “Have a garden?”

“My folks do, and they tend some things with the flowers themselves, I don’t know who they ask for any major work with the trees and landscaping.”

“Well, we’re cheap,” Li was beaming now. “I should have told pops to leave a card with you.”

Robert tried to smile back. It was kind of funny.

“So why’d you join the Army?” Li said suddenly. “That’s a question we’re always asking, why’d you join the Army?”

“Seemed like the right thing to do,” Robert said. “Get specialized training, life skills, serve my country in the meantime. Why not?”

“I did it for the money,” Li said.

“Really?” the explanation was blunter, and more cavalier than Robert expected.

“It’s not that much for enlisted personnel.”

“No, it’s not, but for the money for school, the GI bill, the bonuses. My dad told me he couldn’t pay for college, but we could take out loans and things would be okay. And I didn’t want to do that. There was some of everything else you said. The Army could teach to be tougher and better, I could look better when I go out and search for jobs in the civilian world, I don’t mind doing some civic duty. But the first draw, the main draw was the money.”

“That’s all right,” Robert said, thinking of the sergeant major. “You could have gone some other route to earn tuition. This was a pretty honorable means of going about it.”

“Thanks,” Li said. “I’m kind of regretting it right now though.”

Robert tried to keep his face straight. He was supposed to keep Li’s spirits up. He was supposed to find out if he was angry. “You’re getting better, stronger, all of that?”

“Yeah,” Li said. “Sure.”

“Are we supposed to go?” a cadet said. He’d put down the Norton finally.

“There’s a nurse staring at us from the doorway.”

“She probably wants to get Mr. Terhune,” Li said, gesturing to his sleeping roommate. “He had a pretty bad stroke. When a couple of the other nurses come over she’ll be able to get him into a wheelchair. I guess dinner’s about ready.”

“We’ll let you eat,” Robert said gratefully.

“Is anyone getting you?” a cadet asked.

“I wheel myself.”

“Oh yeah, of course. We’ll see you next time.”

“Yeah, later.”

“Later.”

Li smiled and nodded. “Can I ask you a couple of things though, Mr. Goodman?”

The three cadets had already left the room. Robert turned slowly, feeling his stomach drop. “Sure,” he said.

Brandon Li looked down at one of the Velcro straps on his back brace. Several nurses were coming in. One unfolded a wheelchair; the other was gently tapping the old man on the shoulder.

“I haven’t seen the lieutenant colonel for a while, I had a concern maybe you can relay to her? My social worker came in the other day. It looks like Workers’ Comp is considered my insurance? Is that right?”

All ROTC cadets did have to be officially registered and enrolled with ROTC so that they would be covered by Workers’ Comp in the event of an injury. Robert did remember that to be the case. He nodded.

“That’s right, they should be handling it.” He didn’t know the particulars of how insurance claims were processed and paid though.

Li furrowed his brow further. “I’m already in the Army though, so shouldn’t Tricare also be handling it? Maybe they would be easier to bill too? Because my social worker says that Workers’ Comp isn’t exactly easy to get money from. They haven’t been paying some expenses.”

“Really?” Robert thought a moment. He had heard cadets were covered under Workers’ Comp precisely because they weren’t officially in the Army until they received a commissioning. It made sense that prior service cadets would be covered differently, but he wasn’t sure.

“Yeah.”

Robert cleared his throat. “I really don’t know too much about how that works.”

“I know, I figured as much. But none of the cadre have really been in lately, or I would have told them my social worker wants to talk.”

“I can ask,” Robert said. That much seemed easy enough. “It’s a little bureaucratic and complicated, but it’ll work out.”

“I don’t know. I’ve been in the Army longer than you, Mr. Goodman. Things have a way of dragging if you don’t know have the leverage to push forward. I just have to figure out what leverage I have. Right now, I really don’t know.”

Robert felt himself leaning forward. Had Brandon never considered suing as an option? There were ticklish ripples running down his arms and he barely restrained a shiver. He didn’t think there was any need to mention the possibility now though, to tell how the cadre had been worried about the very thing that Li seemed to have no thought of. It probably would probably go against everyone’s interests if he were to suggest suing. For one thing the cadre had already been preparing for the event, Li would probably have to go through plenty of trouble for little payoff, and litigation in general was a stressful, damaging event. If there were more amicable means of resolving problems, then those were the better means, the right means. Robert felt his mouth open slightly. “You don’t need any leverage,” he said. “Nobody would let this kind of a situation persist.”

He wasn't lying. It was true, ROTC was trying to protect itself currently, but that didn't mean it would neglect anyone, that didn't mean it would stop fulfilling its essential functions and responsibilities. He was telling the truth; that was the right thing to do.

Brandon Li gave him a long look, the narrow eyes crinkling slightly, a half-smile playing at his mouth. "Eventually, right?"

"Eventually."

"There's something else..." Li said, looking down at his hands. "The last time the sergeant major was here, he said everyone at ROTC would be happy to help with anything I needed. And, I think... I've already asked a lot of my roommates and buddies. They're keeping me updated with my professors now, they said they'd microwave food and buy groceries for me, even get me to and from some of my classes, but not all of their schedules mesh too well with mine."

The nurses were rolling the old man. Robert couldn't help but notice from the corner of his eye. Once he had blearily opened his eyes, one had grabbed his shoulder, the other had pushed at his hips, and they had rolled him to the edge of the bed.

"And there's some big hills on campus, you know?" Li said. "One of my classes is at North Gate. Huge hill. I'll be able to get up it eventually, but I'm not exactly at my peak right now. There's more physical therapy I should be getting even when I'm out of here, in clinics Downtown and stuff, but it'll be kind of hard to get around on my own. I don't think I'll always need someone to push me, at least I hope not. But, I don't know if there's anything that can be worked out here?"

It was unclear how the nurses had gotten the old man into a sitting position. They had been adjusting him with their backs blocking the mechanics of what they'd done, but

the old man was sitting, legs dangling limply off the side of the bed. One nurse still held him up by his shoulder, while the other tried to position the wheelchair some particular way before going back to assist her co-worker. The two of them then lifted the old man into the chair, and he sagged into it silently, one eye large and bright, the other small and dull.

Robert looked at Li. "It's a good thing Mr. Terhune's a featherweight," Brandon said. "I don't know how exactly they move the heavier guys. Probably have to get a lot of the male staff."

"They roll people?"

"Yeah, just about everyone. That's how you keep their bodies straight. No bending, no twisting, no pulling, jerking. Some of these guys, you can pop their arms and legs out of their sockets, dislocate something if you're not careful. Some of them are out of surgery too, knee joint replacements, hip replacements, broken bones all around."

Robert looked again at Mr. Terhune, being wheeled past them. His mouth was slightly open, his misshapen eyes looking straight ahead.

"Is he getting better?" he asked, keeping his voice low, trying not to stare too obviously.

"I don't really know. He's been here since before I got in, and he looks the same to me. Sometimes I think he's trying to talk."

"That must be hard on him. And his family."

"I haven't seen anyone visit him," Brandon said. "But I bet that is hard. Maybe he can't get any better, maybe this is it, but he's trapped in his own body like that. I almost

hope he's brain damaged, just so he doesn't know what's happened to him." Brandon smiled briefly. "Isn't that messed up?"

Mr. Terhune and the two nurses turned out of the room. Robert could see two lines of streaks across the linoleum floor, tracks from the wheelchair. The janitor must have been working constantly to mop up all the smudges.

"I think..." Robert said slowly to Li. "You have a reasonable request. I'll see what I can do."

Brandon exhaled loudly. "Thanks a lot." He raised his hand. "And I didn't mean to be rude earlier, about Iraq and stuff. I really wasn't trying to be a dick. I know that kid didn't mean anything." He sounded sincerely, honestly, grateful.

"I'm sure he understands," Robert ventured slowly. He looked out the window, saw how the white-grey of the sky. Despite how close they were to spring there had been no sign of sunlight lately. It looked like rain. Robert tried to think of something more to say. "It's the morphine."

There was a slight flicker in Li's eyes. His smile wavered. "It's Vicodin now," he said as Robert walked out.

If Li was asking for help though, it didn't seem likely he was too angry. It wasn't just that he hadn't thought of suing, he wasn't in any mood of that sort. It made sense to Robert, but the commander wasn't as convinced. "I didn't expect overnight results," she said. "But something like that should be clear soon I'd think."

She waved her hand impatiently when Robert asked about the Worker's Comp issue. The claim had been approved and sent to the hospital with no problems, all the social worker had to do was fax bills to the number listed. It seemed that a few of the bills

had been mailed to ROTC instead due to various misunderstandings. The commander pointed to a manila folder, surprisingly thick, that she was about to hand off to the secretary. They would just be faxed to Worker's Comp from there, help the hospital out by taking that step. Just follow procedure. Sometimes things took a little longer, but there was no need to worry.

"How long?" Robert had asked.

"Well," the commander said, putting the folder back on her desk. "Li may have to call Worker's Comp himself eventually. They only gave us so much information. Then they want to talk to the claimant himself. But it can wait until he's out of the hospital."

Robert wasn't sure if Li would exactly like the answer. "Are there any other resources I can offer Li? Are there pro bono caretakers or anything of that sort?"

"There very well could be. It's worth researching." The commander pursed her lips. "You know, Li did just come back from Iraq, so he's probably established care at the VA. Maybe they can connect him with further resources."

It took Robert a moment to remember what the VA was. Veteran's Affairs Hospital, a medical facility available for soldiers once they'd been separated from Active service. He'd never thought much about it because it had no relevance during Active Duty service, but Robert had heard SMPs reference the VA before in brief and in passing. All they'd said was how no one wanted to go here.

"What do they offer?"

"All kinds of services," the commander said. "And they're located everywhere. You could probably find more details online. I'm sure there's a good one in LA too."

Robert nodded. “Li also wanted to know about whether we could help him around campus? If everyone in the battalion signs up to take Li around once, that would—”

“He’s still serious about that?” the commander slammed her hand on her desk. “The FTX is around the corner. Our resources are limited, even our personnel. And we don’t get a budget for these kinds of expenses. We can’t hire a nurse or anything.”

“The MS-Is and IIs should—”

“They’re not professional caretakers. There still could be liability issues.” The commander threw up her hands. “I’m not saying that a few cadets couldn’t walk with Li between classes now and again, but up hills and to appointments, that’s not something I can mandate. They’re not part of the official ROTC duties. And what if Li was to meet another mishap and one of our cadets was involved?”

“But if someone wanted to—”

“That would be fine, and that would be of their own good will, their own volition, and not as a cadet. But there could be problems if this is arranged through ROTC itself. You can let the cadets know the situation, and that if they want to volunteer to contact him directly. But they arrange it between themselves, not through us.”

Robert nodded slowly. On the walk home he considered what exactly he would have to tell Li. His attempt to help Li was yielding near no results and it seemed he would have to bring bad news on his own. The cadets had made clear that they didn’t want to sign up for any more visits. It was fun seeing Li and all, a good idea and everything, but the other MS-IVs allowed their group members to visit when it was convenient for them, on their own time. No official calendars, no phone calls. If a cadet had the time he was encouraged to drop into Castro Valley, if he didn’t then there was no demand or

expectation. It was more accommodating of people's personal schedules, how appointments could pop up unexpectedly and just as unexpectedly clear. It would be easier, both on him as cadet commander, and on them as midterms were underway, if the visitation schedule as a whole was scrapped.

Robert already knew that he was going to have trouble getting volunteers to push Li around campus, and when he put out the question, he found he was right. The cadets seemed nonplussed.

“How do you handle a handicapped guy? What if we do something wrong?”

“Is he going to hire someone off Craig's List?”

Who was going to do anything? Robert turned things over in his mind, but his thoughts only churned his stomach. All he wanted to do was fulfill the proper responsibilities, make sure that everything was properly taken care of, to drive forward. He just didn't know why he was the only one on that track.

Chapter 8

When Robert went back to the hospital, the nurse looked up from the front desk quizzically. “Just yourself today?” she'd said pleasantly. Li was still in physical therapy, and Robert was asked to wait for fifteen minutes in the dayroom. It was a small lounge past a row of inpatient rooms that was designed to look less clinical. The light was natural, there was regular furniture, chairs and tables, actual carpet, board games to the side, a large television on a stand instead of mounted on the wall, and a piano against one of the walls.

The room was empty when Robert wandered in, and before long he found himself examining the piano, pulling the bench out and sitting by it. A book of sheet music lay dusty at the stand, and Robert brushed it off before leafing through. He stopped at the Maple Leaf Rag, a piece he'd always enjoyed listening to, and had attempted playing before with limited success. Robert set the book up and placed his hands on the keys, carefully examining the notes before playing.

He played, as he always did, slowly. He kept stumbling over various chords, lost count more than a few times, and reconfigured his fingering again and again, but he plodded through it steadily, immersed enough that twenty minutes went by a blink. He'd barely finished one play-through of the piece with plenty of missteps in the process. On professional recordings, the Maple Leaf Rag only took about four flawless minutes of track time.

Robert did not think of this though. He hurried back to the hospital room where he found Li sitting in his wheelchair and frowning. "No entourage?" he said as Robert entered.

"Just me," Robert's stomach was tying and untying into knots. There was a long silence that spread through the room, punctuated only by the slight taps of rain against the windowpanes. Despite how the heater comfortably ran heat through the main areas of the hospital, down the halls and throughout most of Li and Mr. Terhune's room, right by the window there was a palpable chill.

Robert looked about again, trying not to stick too long on the sight of Mr. Terhune, back in the bed with his eyes closed but his mouth moving without sound. Robert stared instead at the fluorescent lights. They weren't strong enough to dispel the

grey of the room, the linoleum floors. He noticed again the TVs attached above the four beds in the room, two beds empty, one shared bathroom on the window side that could only be used either by calling the nurse or by dragging oneself over by wheelchair, the large swath of empty space in the middle of the room.

Robert looked back at Li, still waiting, and Robert found himself talking as he looked around for a place to lean his umbrella, still dripping from the rain. Robert went on about the VA hospital, about the resources available to Li at UC Berkeley as well, services for the disabled. There was the VA Hospital in Oakland, and another larger one at Palo Alto. When he called to ask about caretaker services though, he was transferred from one line to another, leaving messages on some machines, being told to call back at other times, being told even that they couldn't offer him the greatest detail until the veteran called himself. That was what it all came down to. When Robert could get ahold of individuals at the end of the line, they wanted to talk to the veteran himself.

"Well, all right," Li said. "That's great news, once I roll out of here I'll start a phone marathon."

"I'm sure people from the VA will be helpful."

"Yeah, I love phone tag. In between physical therapy and general rehab the hassle'll be educational. It's all character building."

Robert tried to keep his tone cool. Li's irritation was palpable, and he understood why, but if Brandon was able to stay more pleasant during visits then perhaps more cadets would have stuck to the schedule. "I'm making every attempt to meet your requests, but I can't help that some problems are best dealt with directly by yourself. And

what about Cal's Disabled Students Program? If you apply, I'm pretty sure they can get someone to help you get to classes and appointments."

"They only do note-taking. They don't have their own mobility vans or go places. You want to move around, take the bus since they're wheelchair accessible. Anything else, you pay for it."

"Have you talked to them yourself though?"

Li was gripping his armrests hard, his knuckles red and white, his elbows bent. It seemed almost like he would push himself up into standing position, except his walker was not yet in sight. "Obviously, the commander's not about to push me around campus, and sounds like the rest of your are saying you can't either. I can see it's a real inconvenience, a lot of work figuring out who to foist me off to," he said, nearly hissed.

"I'm doing the best I can," Robert said. From the corner of his eye he noticed Mr. Terhune stir slightly in his bed, rolling round so that he seemed to be looking at Robert, one eye a hard glaze, the other eye dead.

"Are you sure you want to stick around here?" Robert said. "Maybe it's better if you went home and came back next semester, when you're more recovered. Just take it easy for a while." It would make things easier, so much easier for everybody.

"I'm not going home," Li said in a short burst of breath. "My mom and dad work all day, I'll be sitting around doing nothing all the time, and my sister, she can't drive yet. She can't push a wheelchair all the time, she's tiny. If I stay here they'll think things are pretty good, they'll relax a little and I can call every other day to talk about how good I am. I go home they'll wear themselves out trying to take care of me. But I don't need to be taken care of. I just need a little more than what I've got."

“Sometimes a clinic has a pickup service,” Robert said. He’d heard a nurse make mention of that much at the front desk.

“Yeah, sometimes. I’ll figure it out.” Li looked up again. “I’ll figure this out.”

“Did the doctors say it’s okay for you to go back to school? I mean, campus really is hilly.” Robert tried to remember all the reasons he’d looked up. Cracks in the concrete, uneven asphalt, hunts for ramps, heavy doors. Cal boasted it was one of the most handicapped accessible campuses in the States, but that was just within certain buildings, and Robert had noticed lately that most people he saw in the city with wheelchairs had motorized ones.

“No,” Li said slowly. “They didn’t much like that idea.”

“Heard you had to stay here longer because of your decision.”

“Yeah, my surgeon said if I fall again I could be permanently paraplegic. Especially right after surgery.”

“And you want to keep going to school?”

“I want to at least put up an effort. If this is impossible I can withdraw later, but if there’s a chance I don’t want to stop. That’s why I asked around for help. I wish I didn’t need to, that I didn’t have to depend on anyone else. But I don’t think that’s the case.”

“I gave your number out to the cadets,” Robert said. “Let them know your situation. Any of them give you a call?”

Brandon glanced at a cell phone and charger on the windowsill. “No,” he said shortly, before shrugging. “Not yet anyway.”

“I can put out the announcement again. There’s probably just some delay because of midterms, but later... I mean this is just a temporary low.”

“You guys like to say that. Remind me again, please! It could have been worse. I’m not really a cripple anyway. Sure, there’s lasting nerve damage, but now I’ve got titanium in my spine and that’s so cool, a real conversation starter. Anyone could adapt to that, it’s not anything critical. That’s because I’m lucky. I’m looking good.”

“Lasting nerve damage?” Robert tried to remember if he’d heard anything about this. He had heard about the lower lumbar fusion, but it hadn’t occurred to him that there would be any radiant issues.

“Yeah,” Brandon Li said. “Whatever, right? Just power through it all. So am I footing the medical bills too? That would make it easier all around, wouldn’t it?”

Robert opened his mouth, but for a second nothing came out. “It’s Workers’ Comp, and they should completely cover all treatment related to your injury.” That was all he had heard regarding the matter.

“And what about Tricare?”

Robert looked down at the ground. He had no idea why the insurance claim had been filed the way it had. It wasn’t as though he could help how slow an insurance company was, he wasn’t an agent there. “Maybe you get both.”

“Then tell the social worker here, because Workers’ Comp still isn’t paying out.” Brandon Li never took his eyes off Robert. “I’d handle it myself if I knew how.”

Robert felt his own temperature rising, bubbling beneath his skin. Li made it sound so easy, but it wasn’t. If he’d been capable of greater production, bigger motions and return, it’d be done. But it didn’t work that way. Finding out about the VA, about DSP, about disabled veteran societies, general veteran organizations, grants and funds, Army programs, for anything that might have some relevance to Li’s direct needs had

been frustratingly impossible. Information was vague or nonexistent, referring to other websites, telephone numbers, manuals. Robert had followed links, researching, making phone calls, browsing websites, ascertaining locations. There was only so much he could do, so much information, and then suddenly he had no further authority, no further access.

It wasn't like he had nothing else to do either. He still had to help run ROTC, make sure the functions there were met with PT, with the lab sessions, with the field training. He still had to go to go to class, take tests, read ahead, finish homework. There were so many procedures and points of contact, dates and times, responsibilities and expectations, all piled up but nothing connected, everything spread apart, needing, demanding, separate and singular attention. The system was beyond him, but he was struggling, in every way, to do everything possible.

But Li showed no modicum of appreciation. "You know, I kind of hoped you could at least let me know that someone knows how to get the bills paid. Are you just messing around or something? What was with that thing you were doing earlier? Were you trying to play Scott Joplin? Way too slow!"

It hadn't occurred to Robert that Brandon would have heard the Maple Leaf Rag. Playing piano alone as he often did, he sometimes forgot how well the sound carried.

"I know."

"It's supposed to be fast, like much faster, it's a fun song, you know? Like jumping, frenzied even. Everything hinges, one note on top of the other, the tempo too, everything you do in that piece, it all depends on what came just before, just building and building and building, until you don't see the parts, until you have the whole, there, entire. And it's perfect."

“I know.”

“Your playing, it’s—it doesn’t build like that. The beat, and your mistakes—it’s like riding on a really slow carousel. That’s like torture, you know?”

Robert felt his face flushing. “Do you play?”

“No, but I know how it’s supposed to sound. You’re piling everything on top of each other too, but it’s not good, it’s... it’s painful. Because it should be fun, you can tell there’s fun to be had, but you’re not, and you’re stuck on the ride.”

Robert felt his mouth dropping open. They had wandered onto an irrelevant topic, and yet Li still used this moment to criticize, to just attack and attack. Despite the wheelchair, there was nothing vulnerable about Brandon. He sat straight and tight-lipped, his eyes flint flecks. Li blamed him. Robert had known it all along, but now the reality was bared. Li blamed him.

Even Mr. Terhune also seemed to have his gaze fixed on Robert, the two inpatients staring him down, flanking him, accusing. But it wasn’t his fault. The major had said so, and none of the other cadre had taken any action against him. They had to be in agreement. They were all still depending on him to watch over Li, why would they do that unless it was a gesture of the utmost trust and assurance? How could it make any sense otherwise?

But Li knew nothing about that, about all the responsibilities, all the tasks that had been entrusted to Robert. He didn’t know how much sacrifice Robert had to make, that no one else was helping, no one else was making time. Robert was the last one standing, the only one trying, and yet all Li could do was pick at him, complaining, whining, talking big, about the piano even, about something that had nothing to do with anything,

and all with that smug sense of entitlement, as though his opinion was the only one that mattered. Just like a typical SMP.

What was the point of being civil? Robert closed his mouth, wishing that Mr. Terhune would stop staring at him. He should stare at Li, Robert thought. Whose fault was it really? Li should have been careful, but obviously he hadn't. Probably he was overconfident, not minding where he moved his hand or placed his foot, not gripping properly. Falling, because he wasn't watching himself. Li had no right to be angry about that, over something that was beyond any normal bounds of control. Asking someone else to pay for his mistake.

"Fine! Figure out Worker's Comp yourself, I'll be sure to bring a manual next time," Robert shot. What was the point of being civil? Li refused to be mollified. Robert tried to think of something else to say, to let the anger have its vent. "And you can't start by playing ragtime fast! You have to start slow!"

It wasn't the best way to end his duties, but the commander would have to understand. If Li refused to work with him, then he wasn't the optimal choice, someone else would have to act as liaison. But Li didn't explode or demand he leave. Brandon Li laughed. "Oh, man!" he yelped. "A manual? I bet there is one!" He leaned forward slightly in the wheelchair, hands gripping the armrests, his face still flushed. "Mr. Goodman," he said, "you're all right."

"What?" Robert said.

"God, that actually hurt my back. No, I mean, you're right, man, I'm being a dick again."

"More than that." Robert said, but his anger was ebbing.

Brandon Li chuckled again. “Got it, got it. If you think I’m one ungrateful little bastard you’re probably right. At my unit, before all this happened, there were a couple sergeants and specialists who tried ROTC a year or two ago, and they actually mentioned you by name. They kind of creeped me out a little when they knew I was thinking about the program, said to watch out for that turkey vulture.”

“Turkey vulture?”

“Yeah!”

“They called me a turkey vulture?” It was oddly specific.

“And a buzzard. And other things, but I’ll stop there.”

“Why turkey vulture?”

Brandon Li was grinning widely. “Had to do with how tall you are, that you kind of loomed over everything and just added this overdramatic tone. That was the gist of it. Those guys, they just said you were a drag, made things way too serious. They thought it was because you wanted to look good in front of everyone or something. But, whatever, man,” Brandon said. “It’s a relief you have a sense of humor.”

Robert glanced at Mr. Terhune, but Li’s roommate had closed his eyes while his mouth had opened, fast asleep. Brandon leaned far back into the wheelchair, his back somehow staying rigidly straight in the wheelchair but his neck tilting up until he looked at the ceiling. “And now I feel like a jackass.” Li continued staring at the ceiling with his neck craned all the way up, the sound and shadows of water flickered across the drawn curtain. “It’s really coming down, isn’t it?”

“Still winter,” Robert said. “Even if it’s March.”

“Man, you don’t have to tell me. I feel it. Been cold, hasn’t it?”

“It has.”

“How’s PT?”

“Wet.”

Li grinned. “Yeah, days like this I really miss LA. Probably eighty degrees over there right now.”

“You don’t like Berkeley?”

Brandon Li shrugged. “Not my kind of weather. It’s nice and dry and warm down south, right? You get a little spoiled. And it’s too funky for me in Berkeley. I like a little more space, not so many flyers and causes chasing after me.”

Robert nodded. “I get that. But you still want to finish out the semester. That’s admirable worth ethic.”

“It’s not really that,” Li said. “I’m just desperate.”

“To go to school?”

Li shook his head. “Just somewhere else. Do you know what I mean, what it’s like when you just feel trapped? Like really, totally stuck?”

The rush of rain grew louder, a total, static wash of sound. It had been one of the first things Robert had thought he truly hated about the Bay Area. When he was still at the dorms he used to go to the top floor and see the dingy expanse of the city hemmed in by black water. He looked out to see past the city, to the thin dock of the Marina reaching and ending to the ocean, the foggy outline of San Francisco further in the distance, the near invisible wisp of the Golden Gate Bridge that only emerged fully on rare, fleeting clear days, the closer, darker, stark and steel scaffolding of the Bay Bridge running out to Oakland.

He'd never thought that the cities besides Berkeley were better, but from where he was they at least seemed quieter, less encumbered by an empty pretense at bustle, enthusiasm, excitement, no sign of the students who buzzed about certain and assured, bright and tasteless as the tie-died souvenir T-shirts. Berkeley, Robert had thought after his first week in, was a grey city pretending to be something it wasn't.

Always trying to be something it wasn't. Robert listened and waited. It was not just rain he could hear, but the sounds of the hospital. There were other patients shuffling about in their respective rooms, watching their television sets set at low murmurs. It was not as though the hospital wasn't trying to make things rosier, homier, livelier. The television sets provided some entertainment, the hospital pajamas had flower patterns and they sometimes came in colors other than blue, and the food adhered strictly to the doctor's dietary recommendations, so they were at least nutritious.

But the problem with being trapped in one place, trying to pretend there was no trap, was the time. The physical therapy lasted only so long, the doctor visits were intermittent and brief, the friends, roommates, family a short respite no matter how long the stay. Fellow patients were in various states of pain and lucidness. The nights were quiet, the nurses came and went. It was all very professional, very clean, and very lonely.

Robert breathed. He'd tried to stay aloof and professional himself. Everyone had, they talked about how Li was feeling, looked forward to improvements about his condition, but none of them liked bringing too much attention to the fact that he was broken while they were whole, that life was a different color outside the hospital doors. The cadets didn't like these visits. Who did? It was easier to get the visit over with, to walk outside and relax a little bit, to go on to a wholesome, healthier state of being.

Confronted by the frailty of being, the smallness of life, it was easier to go through the motions and forget. But Robert wasn't allowed to look away.

"Yeah," Robert said, his words hanging in the hospital room. "I think I know a little bit."

Brandon Li smiled briefly. "Doesn't matter how big or small the trap is, a country, a city, some building, a room. Even yourself, just being landlocked in your own body. The only thing that makes you stay is the surety you'll leave. That you go on, that things will get better, you'll get better once this is all behind. So when you don't know if that certainty's there..."

"You keep looking."

"Exactly," Brandon nodded. "Just keep looking, and in the meantime you try to get through moment by moment. But you keep looking for a way out, how to drive forward. And even if there isn't you have to at least fool yourself."

Chapter 9

Robert hadn't been sure what kind of report to give when he next saw the commander, but when he was called in he was relieved to see the sergeant major sitting by her. "Mr. Goodman," he said, with a smile. "Good to see a friendly face for once."

The feeling was mutual, but the commander was not particularly warm herself. She leaned her chin into her hand and stared hard at a few reports on her desk while the sergeant major sat by her side nodding as Robert talked. She hadn't really seemed to be listening but once the sergeant major had asked his questions, she looked at Robert.

“Just wanted clarification,” she said, straightening the report in front of her. “Did Li ever mention in your hearing the cause of his accident?”

“I think he did.”

“And did he say, at that time, in your hearing, and in the hearing of other cadets, that his hand slipped, with no indication of any fault lying elsewhere?”

“He did,” Robert said.

The commander leaned back and smiled. “That’s what I thought. He said as much during one of my visits as well.”

Robert tried to smile back. “So he won’t be suing, no need to worry.”

“It’s helpful. But, Mr. Goodman, you can identify the cadets who heard Li say he slipped, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“And would you be willing, if it came down to it, to sign a statement that you heard Brandon Li declare his injury an accident, a case of the hand slipping as you heard?”

Robert felt the smile on his face stiffen. It was not inaccurate, he had heard Brandon Li say that he had slipped, had heard all the jokes about it. It would not be wrong to sign such a statement, strictly for recording purposes. “Certainly,” he said, but the word barely squeezed out from between his clamped teeth.

“We speak with a JAG officer today, so depending on what advice we get I might follow up with you, but otherwise you’re free to go.”

Robert stiffened slightly. “JAG?” It stood for Judge Advocate General, IG was for Inspector General; they were positions within the legal, investigative branch of the Army.

“Is there going to be a trial? I don’t think Li wants to pursue anything. Will a statement really be necessary?” Robert asked. His stomach was rolling again, and his heart seemed to sag hard against his ribcage. It disturbed him somehow, the idea of making a written testimony about what Brandon Li had or hadn’t said, even if the testimony would be true, even if it would only be a record.

“I hope not,” the commander said. She was maintaining her own smile. “If I could simply focus on meeting Mr. Li’s needs I would, but the times are such that we have to guard our own backs before we can adequately assist anyone else. It’s a real shame.”

“Did he say he blamed someone?”

“No, no. Nobody,” the sergeant major interjected. “But you’ve always been thorough, Mr. Goodman, you know the Warrior Ethos. Never leave a fallen comrade. You’ve done that, and it’s simply outstanding. But in the professional capacity you’ve always got to put the mission first. You still take care of soldiers, but the main reason you band together is to achieve something larger, to protect something larger. Even when nobody’s at fault, you have to take measures for the whole. Maybe Li won’t personally want to start anything, but someone else, anyone else feels litigious, they’ll try to find things. Someone could complain that there should have been harnesses, or giant mattresses on the ground.”

“I guess that might have helped,” Robert thought out loud.

The commander frowned, but the sergeant major chuckled. “I’m sure many mothers would like that idea, but accidents happen even with extra equipment. Besides, there’s a point where with all the padding and babying that there’s not any training going on. You’re not going to have all that safety equipment in the field every time, that’s the

reality, and you don't want to set off false expectations there. But someone who's intent on suing won't see that angle."

"But you said Li wouldn't."

"I doubt it. But even if Li says nothing, what if brigade has a specific question, wants to know what protocols we were going through? We've got to know for our own sakes, run our own investigation, have our own evidence and defenses so someone from higher doesn't have to come over and run us down." The sergeant major glanced at the commander briefly, but she was looking steadfastly at her reports. "I'm not saying I like this, but it has to be done."

"Then what... what should I do now, sergeant major?"

"Li should be out of the hospital soon," the commander said. "Before the FTX. His roommates will be picking him up, correct?"

The sergeant major nodded before looking back at Goodman. "Keep watching out for Li. That's all."

"How?"

There was a long pause. "You'll find a way," the sergeant major finally said. "I know you, Mr. Goodman, you're always out to do the right thing. And you'll succeed."

Robert didn't know how he could go back to the hospital after that conversation. Nor was there any real reason to. He'd already looked into the Worker's Comp dilemma, already disseminated volunteer information about helping Li around campus, and had ascertained whether or not Li was litigious. Robert knew that this was a good time to exit. He'd fulfilled all his responsibilities, he'd achieved all of the commander's objectives, and there was nothing left to do. He just didn't feel he'd accomplished anything. Still, he

could leave Li alone now, but he wanted to finish correctly, make things right, he needed to make one last visit, to close things out, and to apologize. For the way things had turned out, even if it was nobody's fault. That there would be more waiting. That he couldn't help anymore. He would apologize, and that would be all.

But gathering the will to go back, even for the last hospital visit, was difficult. It was hard to swallow without feeling his intestines turning, and a space between his ribs weighed by a heavy, slow burn that made it hard to keep even air down. Oxygen kept being pushed back up his throat in slow waves. He resisted the urge to drive past the hospital parking lot and back to the freeway, and even when he parked he nearly slammed his head against the steering wheel. The heaviness in his stomach had spread into his legs. He didn't want to open the car door.

Slowly, slowly he walked into the hospital, gave an empty smile to the nurse who recognized him, and followed her, dully, down the hallway. "You're his most constant visitor," she said. "You two must be good friends."

Not really, Robert almost said.

But instead of taking Robert to Brandon's room, the nurse led him into the physical therapy room. Robert remembered the place well since he'd passed by it and looked in curiously the past few times he was a visitor. The physical therapy clinic was better lit than the patient's rooms after all, cheerful and varied with mirrors on the wall, yoga balls and other equipment Robert could not identify to the sides, and a section of padded mats for stretching and simple exercises. Today however, there was a volleyball net spread across the middle of the room. On both sides of the net were patients, some standing with their necks craned upwards perhaps with their walker near at hand, some

part-standing part-crouching over their wheelchair, legs tottering, and some sitting quite firmly in their wheelchair. A balloon drifted lethargically in the air. When it descended toward a patient an air would raise and slowly bat the balloon upwards again, hopefully over the net, until someone else could take their turn. The physical therapists stood to the sides of the group of patients, calling out encouragement enthusiastically and eyeing those who stood and wobbled. Mr. Terhune, one of the few non-participants, sat sedately in his wheelchair, arms folded across his lap, another physical therapist standing right by him.

Other than those cautious lookouts for falls, the game appeared to progress steadily, and Robert could see on the faces of some of the patients that they were enjoying themselves immensely. He found himself biting his lip. At that age, stuck in a rehab hospital, he supposed this kind of a game did appear unusually exciting. Li stood out as the youngest, and notwithstanding his back brace and walker a few inches in front of him, the fittest. He didn't have to wait as long for the balloon to come toward him, he swatted it back with what constituted as a hard strike, though watching the elderly around him it was obvious he was trying to tap lightly. There was a sheepish grin on his face, but he played along graciously.

"You're one of the Army guys, right?" a woman said when she saw Robert. She wasn't wearing the nurses' uniform but casual clothes, meaning that she was one of the physical therapists. "I saw you lead in all those troopers a couple weeks back."

"Yes," Robert said. He glanced at the game and back to the therapist. She looked vaguely familiar just because he constantly saw various staff about the hospital, but he hadn't talked to anyone besides Li before.

“I keep forgetting, are you one of his roommates too?”

“No.”

She smiled. “The game won’t last much longer so you can talk to Brandon pretty soon.”

“Thanks, I’m not in a hurry though.” Robert turned his glance back toward the game where the other physical therapists were already watching people sit back in their wheelchairs to be wheeled away. Brandon was still standing, watching the older folks being tended to, standing with delicate balance without touching the walker.

“He’s been walking to and from PT these days,” the physical therapist said. “He’s doing great.”

“Back to normal soon?”

“For the most part.”

It was okay, Robert thought. He could apologize, and leave. Brandon Li would be fine. A nurse walked by, and taking Brandon’s empty wheelchair, proceeded to push it away. Meanwhile, Brandon turned slowly on his feet. It was clear he was trying to keep his shoulders square and his back straight, to prevent himself from leaning on the walker or from bending at the waist. His movements were careful, he seemed to take great care to lift his feet, but his right foot flopped and dragged after the left.

Robert gave a quick glance at the therapist, who with arms crossed, was watching Brandon intently. “Does he need help?”

“Don’t worry. Once he’s turned he can walk just fine.”

“What’s wrong with his foot?”

The physical therapist gave Robert a quick look. She seemed mildly surprised. “That’s an effect of the nerve damage. His right’s just a tad weaker than the left. But given his accident he really is lucky.”

“Does that go away?”

She sighed. “Doc says it’s probably permanent, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t improve.”

Brandon had made the steps and movements necessary to turn his body and walker toward the doorway. He began to step forward with good energy, his left foot moving forward, his hands relatively light on the walker, the right foot still dragging.

The physical therapist stepped forward as well to walk alongside Brandon, and Robert felt himself following after. But when Li saw him, his face reddened and his mouth curved downwards. “Hey,” he said, pushing forward. “Mr. Goodman.”

“Thought I’d spare you any torturous piano playing today. Didn’t want to throw off your game.” Robert meant to joke, but his words came across flat instead of jovial.

“Sure,” Brandon said, his face still tomato-colored. As they turned into his room, the physical therapist waved and left, doing exactly what Robert wished he could do.

“So did the doctor’s say how much longer you have here?”

“I should be out next week, except Worker’s Comp hasn’t approved a wheelchair or walker for when I’m out of here. So they can’t release me until I have the proper equipment. So I’ll be hanging out, until things look more definite.”

Robert blinked and it quickly flashed through his mind that a month had passed. How much longer would Worker’s Comp take? But the commander had assured him that things would go through. Li would have to call at some point, maybe, but it would go

through. He would leave, they would all leave, and they would all move on from here. “Is it so bad when you get to play volleyball? You’re the star athlete here.”

Brandon burst out laughing, the sudden choke of sound startling Robert. Li’s eyes shrank further, little arcs in his red face. “Yeah, I work out,” he said finally, wiping a hand across his forehead where small beads of sweat glistened. He glanced at the palm of his hand, a slow frown forming. “But obviously, hitting balloons puts me at my max.”

“You’re recovering steadily though.”

“Not so steady,” Li said, a little loud. “I’m just trying to get back to where I was.”

It was hard to think of an appropriate response. Robert paused, looking at the top back of Li’s head. His hair had gotten long, covering the entire back of his neck, black and coarse, too long by Army standards. They moved back to Li’s room, where Mr. Terhune was already placidly lying in bed.

Robert still couldn’t quite make up his mind what to say. Perhaps this was the moment to apologize. He had done everything he could, but Li would have to look into other resources to get around campus. The only other option, Robert thought suddenly, was if he offered to push Li around campus. Robert’s heart shuddered. It was a logical conclusion, never leave a fallen comrade was part of the Warrior Ethos. It didn’t matter that he never could quite see Li as a comrade. It didn’t matter what he thought comrades were. Robert didn’t know of any alternative ways to view a fellow soldier.

Robert opened his mouth, but then closed it. He wouldn’t be able to leave if he volunteered. And would Brandon even appreciate, or want him to? He was cadet commander, it wouldn’t quite look right even if he hadn’t arranged this through ROTC. The commander would disapprove, probably ask that he stop. Then what?

“Hey,” Robert managed. “Did anyone volunteer to help you to class?”

Li was still looking straight ahead and out the window, where it was raining once again. He didn’t move, gave no indication he’d heard the question.

“Hey,” Robert tried again. “If no one’s called, it’s all right if you call them.”

Brandon shook his head. “I’m really not out to force anyone.”

“But it’s fine to just ask,” Robert said. “Whoever you want, just ask him. I’m sure if you call someone, whoever, they’ll help.”

“Probably. But I’m a guy in a wheelchair, it’s hard to say no. Kind of awkward, don’t you think?”

“We have to figure out how to work together somehow. Part of being all you can be, the Army principles at work.”

Brandon’s smile stretched, but there wasn’t anything exactly mirthful about it.

“‘Be all that you can be,’” he repeated. “That’s no longer the slogan, you know? Now it’s ‘Army of One’ I think. But ‘be all that you can be,’ that’s a little cooler. But the slogans change, you keep up with the times, new catchphrase for new generations or something.”

Robert nodded. “I think the original fits better.”

“No, ‘Army of One’ makes sense.” Brandon’s eyes narrowed, and he looked away. “You look out for number one, you know? You look out for yourself first.”

“But you’re also a team. Each person should want to get better, to try harder. If you have character anyway.”

“What if you don’t?” Li said. “What if all you can be isn’t much?”

Robert looked at the clock on the wall. Li hadn’t asked anyone for help, he hadn’t asked him. Robert felt his fingers tapping on his thigh. He would have said yes, of course,

he would have, but Li wasn't asking. Robert didn't know why, but before matters changed he desperately wanted to leave. "You've been deployed," he said, trying to find a more graceful track to end on. "You know people do amazing things out there."

"Yeah, that's what makes the news. But I saw a lot more of the other side."

"But you were inside the wire, the circumstances were different. In trial, that's when you really see a person's real character." Robert paused. "And besides, you're at a low point right now, all that time in Iraq, and you get injured on the home front. That's too bad, that's really—"

"Yeah, I noticed, the irony."

"But that's exactly it. Right now, being that this is probably the greatest challenge you're facing, it's easy to get discouraged. But you'll get through this."

"No," Li said, and when Robert looked at his face he saw that they were both surprised by the answer. "No," Brandon said again, glancing up at the ceiling then at his hands. "This isn't as bad as deployment."

For a moment Robert wondered if he should ask anything, or whether he should stay quiet, let whatever it was that had happened remain unruffled, firmly in the past. He had heard of trauma from battle, except he remembered specifically hearing Li deny that he'd had any direct combat experience. His unit had stayed on a base. Li had mentioned they were shelled constantly, but no one had been directly injured during the year he'd spent behind the fence. It seemed strange then, that he should consider any kind of trauma at all. "Did you see something?" Robert ventured. He couldn't help it.

"No, nothing that crazy. We were fobbits, stayed on that Forward Operating Base,

never went anywhere. All the violence was on the periphery, stuff I heard about, no direct contact. We had water, tolerable DFAC food, MWRs, the internet, more comforts than the guys on the road. You knew you had a cushy mission so you were supposed to suck it up.”

“But it was worse than this?”

Brandon sighed. “There was some psychologist who gave us a debrief when we were leaving. About how we were normal guys in abnormal situations, so it was natural we didn’t feel like ourselves overseas. It was just the circumstances, you know? Being stuck in a place, being stuck in Iraq, in Tikrit, in that little base. And he was right a little. It was just a lot of time with yourself, contained in this little bit of space. A lot of time with other people you can’t get away from.

“We were okay, but we weren’t okay. Even during the move process, everyone’s little complaints and quirks. Little things got so big. We were just obsessing over these little dramas that kept adding up. People at each other’s throats because someone had a whiny voice, or taking breaks that went ten minutes over, not properly distributing the Girl Scout cookies from care packages, gossip and back talk about I don’t remember anymore. I couldn’t let some things go like I used to. I couldn’t relax. We all knew we were lucky, we had our own important mission, in its own way. But the infantry guys and the other transporters, they were out there getting killed, and we were just sitting around, yelling at each other over stupid little dramas. We did nothing, even though we had our mission, our job, it felt like we did nothing.

“It got to this point where I didn’t care anymore. I really didn’t. I thought I’d do my job and just worry about myself. If anyone complained, I’d listen because I couldn’t

leave the workstation, but it was not like it meant anything to me. Then things started coming out that I never noticed before, one of the guys in my unit was suicidal, a few of the couples were going through divorces, people broke up with girlfriends and boyfriends, missing kids, buddies. We were all stressed, right? And no one's really to blame for anything, we're just stressed, and we had our problems. But you know what? I still didn't care, even though all I had to do was try a little harder. Seemed like everything I did was wrong, but still, just try a little harder. But I couldn't. I just couldn't."

Robert felt his stomach dropping. He had to apologize, and soon. He had to leave. But Brandon was still talking. He wouldn't stop. "I don't think the psychologist didn't get it all though. We weren't ourselves exactly, but really, it was more like we weren't what we wanted to be, like we couldn't pretend. Maybe were more ourselves over there than anywhere else. It wasn't the place, the place just meant we couldn't get away from ourselves, that we couldn't get space to recompose a bit. But that was us. That was how we really were. And we couldn't be any better than that."

Brandon paused, his hands went to the Velcro straps of the back brace, absently pulling at them. "And when we left I thought that was all. I didn't want to see anyone from my unit anymore, transferred up here, and thought I'd get over all the nothing I'd been through. ROTC seemed like a new route, I wasn't sure I'd be an officer exactly, but I thought I could just coast a bit."

Brandon smiled, glancing back at Robert. "Guess I was wrong there too. My happy, boring deployment story. Where everything just wasn't too bad, but nothing right either. And that's what's painful, you know how it's supposed to be, how it could be, but

it's not. Like, you know, the piano, the music. You can't really feel satisfied unless things are perfect."

It was impossible. "Nobody's perfect," Robert said. He couldn't agree. The standard of another plane of existence couldn't be applied to this one. The physical life was one of effort, of progressing from where one stood. "You just do what you can."

Li laughed. "You're right. But it doesn't hurt any less. I'm just saying that while I was over there it felt like everything was running backwards, just falling apart. It's not so much that you're trying to get ahead or be better. You're just trying not to go to pieces."

He had to go. Now, Robert thought. This was the right time to apologize.

"Now," Brandon said into the gloom. "I think, after all that, I should probably say sorry."

The world seemed to spin around Robert, he floundered, trying not to sink under. "What?"

"That was way too much talking. But you've done a lot for me here. You already come by more than anyone else, and I don't mean to be an ass—I mean a jerk this whole time."

Robert felt his eyes stretching wider. "What?" he said again.

"They said you were kind of hard to get along with. Not a cool guy. Didn't like SMPs or something. And when I first saw you, you really looked like a buzzard. So I didn't like you any better. And I was just tired that morning. I haven't had to get up at three for a while, so I wasn't in a good mood in the first place. I was mouthing off, that Goodman, good man thing. So I didn't give you a good impression."

“No,” Robert said, feeling slightly panicked. His mouth opened but his tongue felt dry. “It’s all right. You don’t have to apologize.”

“I do. I mean, I heard other things later, you know? That you were the cool and distant type, hard to get along with exactly, hard to read, but reliable, always there in a tight spot. And it’s true.”

“No,” Robert said. The blood was tingling in his face, at the curve of his cheek, skimming along his forehead, in the tips of his ears. He knew he was damning himself, but he couldn’t get out of it. “You fell forty feet!” he said, the words rushing forward. He didn’t want to wonder what Brandon was thinking anymore, he wanted to know, to face it. No more cycling around, coming back. This was how the Army was supposed to work, how life was supposed to work. He’d been negligent, he’d brought no help, and Li was apologizing to him. They had to get back to the real issue, it was time to move on, whatever he had to do to make it up. Any clue to make it better. “Aren’t you mad? I was supposed to be watching.”

The rain continued to fall, Mr. Terhune stayed comatose in his corner, and Robert waited. Li’s eyes widened, just slightly. “Goodman, come on, so you happened to be there. It was just a second, I didn’t even know I was falling till I hit the ground. Even if you did grab me somehow, I could have just pulled you down too. Then maybe we’d both be here, or maybe it’d be worse than that.”

Robert felt his jaw drop open. This wasn’t anything he had expected.

“Did you think I blamed you or something? I mean, I wasn’t exactly happy about how things worked out, and I did resent you at first, but I’ve had time to think everything

out, you know? It wasn't just whether you were watching, I wasn't watching." Brandon's brows knit together. "It wasn't your fault. Accidents, they work like that sometimes."

"But—"

"I don't blame you. Seriously."

Chapter 10

Robert didn't know exactly how it was he found himself outside the hospital and by his car. He leaned against the side of his door, elbows at his side and with his head in his hands. He'd completed his mission, he'd done what was right. ROTC was free and clear. Everything that could have possibly eased his conscience was present. He was a good soldier, he'd always been and had been recognized as so much. That was his true character. Nobody blamed him, nobody thought anything that had happened was his fault. He was free and clear. Li had assured him, his face had been open and honest. He really wasn't angry. Things had turned out better than he had any right to expect. Perfectly, in fact.

"Wow," Li had said, shortly before their farewells. "You really are a good man."

But he wasn't. Despite all the reassurances, despite everything people said, he didn't understand how that could be true. Robert couldn't stop the hot, gnawing, feeling in his chest. It had first started eating into him as he was leaving the hospital, walking down the hall, trying not to run. He'd heard someone, one of the inpatients most likely, tinkering at the piano, playing a few unsteady, high-pitched notes. The tune had been so familiar, but he couldn't place it, and he didn't want to listen.

Robert thought he knew what Li had meant by perfection. How music was a kind of perfection. Every note hinged and interlocked, every part had to be where it was needed. It was a system of interdependency, swelling and folding onto itself, bound in order. The counterpoints of the base and treble clef, the rhythm, the duration and movement of the notes, all of it set and dictated. Yet despite how meticulously designed a melody was, what came of this order defied the order itself, went beyond. How notes flourished, crescendo and cascade, the trills and waves of sound, a surge that was more than just notes and tune, but something else entirely, a feeling, a knowledge—transcendence. Yet even while music spilled out of its own strictures, it could not exist without them. To do right, to be correct, Robert hadn't always thought that those things necessarily meant perfection, but they were essential to the very meaning of the word. A missed note or a wrong one, an off- beat, and all was thrown out of alignment.

That perfection be impossible was understood, Robert had thought. He accepted it, he'd thought. What he couldn't understand was how close it seemed, and yet how far away it really was. The slightest misstep and the whole thing was ruined, all the build, the growth, the heft, gone. Its multitude of parts collapsed. Intention didn't matter, effort didn't matter. It was the weight of an entire system, broken down, and somewhere in there, himself, just one of many pieces that no longer fit. Nothing was sound, unless all was sound.