

## Sergeant Micheal's Band of Cold-Blooded Patriots

By Weston Goodman

Private Conrad Willis folded his clothes and settled into his quarters. His cargo pants hung loosely over his shaved legs, belt cinched tightly around his narrow hips and his gym tee hugged him nice and close, as he emptied his pockets and put his wallet, keys and cell phone in a small steel locker next to his bed. Most of the other recruits in his quarter did the same. They folded their clothes, fluffed their pillows; they feigned productivity as best they could. The quarters were bare-- not bare as in empty, but bare as in sparse. It was strictly the bare minimum.

A tall, gruff, middle-aged noncom walked out of the barracks. He slithered into the quarters, unnoticed.

“Alpha Company! Ten-hut!” he bellowed.

The company of marines, more than sixty of them, lined up, side by side at attention. The noncom took his sweet time, reveling in the unmatched silence of subordinates in waiting, as he tongued a small toothpick in the corner of his mouth.

“Alright, maggots! I am Gunnery Sergeant Michaels and I am your Senior Drill Instructor,” he said as he made his way down the line, his aviator glasses shimmering with a subtle glint. “From now on you will speak only when spoken to. You will address me as ‘sir.’ You will follow every order I give until my dead body lays withered and old. Do I make myself clear?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” they all yelled.

“Say it like you got hair on your fuckin peaches!” he yelled.

“SIR! YES, SIR!”

“I am your lord and savior. I am the voice you hear on Death’s doorstep. You have walked into my bootcamp as pathetic cock-sucking-pieces-of-shit, but you will emerge as victorious patriots, sent by your magnificent country to restore order,” he kissed his finger and pointed it to the sky, “to bring peace to God’s great nation.”

Sergeant Michaels quickened his pace to an almost euphoric skip, until he got to the last marine in line, at which point, he threw on a pivot, and continued his strut in the other direction. “We are at war, gentleman! If you elementary-school-girls have any hope of holding a rifle in my Corps, you will give me the blood in your body and the light in your soul. Am I understood?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” they all yelled.

“Bullshit! I can’t hear you!”

“SIR! YES, SIR!”

“I’m gonna whip you fat, worthless scum into shape. You are at my complete and utter mercy!” The Sergeant took off his shades and cleaned them with the loose cloth of his uniform, “Your country needs you! Now more than ever! Don’t let your country down...”

He put the shades back on, straightened his posture, and pointed to the marine directly in front of him, “What’s your name, private?”

“Harper Smith, sir!”

“And where are you from?”

“Nantucket, sir!”

“Massachusetts? Well fuck me! What are you doing out here?”

“Serving my country, sir!”

“Don’t give me bullshit clichés, private! I asked you a real Goddamn question!”

“I need the money, sir!”

“I bet you do! All those nickels you made sucking cock on the corner and you still can’t pay your rent? Goddamnit! Life’s a bitch, ain’t it?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” Harper yelled as his cheeks turned flush.

“You know what Private?” the Sergeant smirked. “I’m gonna start calling you Parts.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“I said Parts. Imma start calling you Parts. Get it?”

“Sir! I’m not sure I do, sir!” Harper yelled.

“From now on, your name is Private Parts,” the Sergeant looked around at the other recruits, “If any of you boys need a jerk, I’m sure Private Parts, here, can sort you all out.”

Conrad held back a giggle.

The Sergeant caught him, midglance, and threw his clipboard across the room of young marines. Conrad ducked as the clipboard brushed his hair.

“You got somethin you wanna say over there, Private Fuck-Face?” the Sergeant asked.

“Sir! No, sir!” Conrad replied.

“It’s funny, cause it seems like you got something you wanna say. How about you just fuckin say it, private? We’re all so curious!” he said sarcastically.

“I just thought your joke was funny, sir.”

“Oh, you did? Stop, you’re gonna make me blush.” He grabbed his cheeks, mockingly, and turned to face the other marines, “I think he has a crush on me!”

Just as quickly as he made the joke, he spun and threw a heavy fist into Conrad’s diaphragm. Conrad collapsed to his knees in fit of wheezing.

“What’s your name, private?”

“Conrad... uh... Willis, sir,” he coughed out.

“Why are you here, Private Willis?”

“Because my country needs me, sir” he said, as he climbed back to his feet.

“Your country needs a lot more than a cock-sucker like you!” Michaels sneered. “Why are you really here?”

“Because my country needs me, sir,” Conrad said a little louder.

“Yah, you said that,” Michaels scolded. “And why does our country need you?”

“Because I’m a winner, sir. And this country needs to win.”

The Sergeant smirked, like a hungry spider that just watched a fly get tangled in its inescapable web. “That’s cute,” he laughed.

A single breath of silence graced the barracks before the Sergeant loaded his hand behind his back and, with the force of a moving car, slammed the side of Conrad's head with his open palm.

"We'll see about that," he glared down at Conrad's teary eyes, "in good time, Private Willis."

The Sergeant turned back to the other marines in Alpha Company, standing at attention. "Now, I can be a nice guy or I can be the stepdad that fucks your mom and beats you...That's up to you, gentleman! You will be ranked based on your performance in camp. Ranks will be on an individual basis. I don't care what squad you're in. I don't care who your Corporal is. I don't care what your fucking name is. You will be ranked on your ability to run fast, follow orders, and complete challenges. Is that understood?"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" the marines yelled.

"I can't fucking hear you, Goddamnit!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

"All of you! On the fucking floor! I've heard cancer patients yell louder than you!"

The marines did their pushups. They counted in unison. One of the marines twisted his wrist and squealed out in pain. With one swift boot, the Sergeant kicked him across the face, continuing on like nothing happened, "Peace at last! Peace at last! Your country needs peace at last!"

The recruits kept counting, "45, 46, 47..."



The Joint Chiefs of Staff were called into this meeting under the auspices of "National Security," but fundamentally, this wasn't the case. Of course, "National Security" was at risk, the United States was at war, but the war was nearly a year old and very little had changed; to frame it like there was some critical new development was self-serving, at best-- deceptive, more likely.

General Wheeler, the Commandant of the US Marine Corps, thought about this as he drummed his fingers, furiously, against the long, mahogany table, buried in a bunker, deep under the ground of a top-secret DARPA research facility somewhere below Nevada.

He was surrounded by the highest ranking military officials of every service branch, and as he sat there, contemplating the state of the Union, he wondered exactly how they had gotten to this point.

The US was at war with itself-- the poor had taken arms against the wealthy-- and while the Media enjoyed calling it the Great American Civil War, it was far different from the Civil War that ended in 1865.

The Great American Civil War was not a battle between armies-- 'if only,' General Wheeler thought to himself, sarcastically. No, this was a war against domestic terrorism. It was a decentralized force of heavily-armed extremists so enraged-- by the ultra-rich, by their dark money, by their ability to hide in the shadows and bend American politics to their will-- that they burned corporate office buildings, assassinated billionaires, and mailed bombs to disrupt supply chains and scare the powerful. These terrorists called themselves the American Salvation Party, or the ASP, and had an estimated ten million active members, though that intel was unconfirmed, and the exact numbers were still in question.

The Chairman of The Joint Chiefs sat at the head of the board room table, slouched over, his knee bouncing up and down in a fit of anxious tapping. General Wheeler couldn't take the silence any longer and stood up to pace.

The meeting was somewhat informal, in many ways, it was called out of desperation. While protocol was appreciated, it was by no means enforced. Everyone in the room was of high enough rank and it was generally understood that respect was implied.

"We're just not trained for this..." the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs admitted, "what does he even want us to do?" He glanced over to the White House Chief of Staff, the only civilian in the room, "Connelley?"

Connelley was preoccupied, punching keys on her laptop, "I'm sorry. What was that?"

"Seriously!?" Wheeler complained. "What could be more important than this?" Wheeler waved his hands to get her attention. "You home? Connelley? He asked you a simple question. What does the President want us to do?"

She flipped through her notes, almost casually, "He wants you to restore order."

"But what does that mean?" the Chairman exhaled.

"It means you do your jobs. Just instead of doing them in Afghanistan, you do them here." She pulled out her phone and began texting, "And look on the bright side, your men will get to sleep in their own beds at night."

"This is really what the President wants?" The Chairman asked, almost defeated.

Connelley looked up from her phone, put it down and contorted her face in frustration, "Chairman, you act like we have a choice!? A year ago, I had this exact meeting with the FBI and look how well that turned out," she gestured to the underground bunker they were in. "We got our fucking asses kicked! We tried to take it easy on 'em, show them some restraint, and now we have to hide like we're twelve year old girls running from a schoolyard bully." She stood up and met the Chairman's gaze, "We're the most powerful military force in the world. It's about time we fucking act like it." She sat back down, fuming.

The whole room remained silent. Wheeler, who was standing in the corner, reemerged, frustrated, "You know what you're asking us to do, right? You know what this would mean?" Wheeler pushed.

"I'll say it again! What choice do we have?" Connelley insisted.

One of the other Generals in the room butted in, General Rogers of the US Airforce, “How do you see this working?”

“March into every major city with your tanks and planes and drones and scare everyone into submission,” she said matter-of-factly. “Then we can disarm everyone and try to get things back to normal.”

“And what happens if they’re not scared? What happens when they start shooting at us?” Wheeler asked, baffled.

“I don’t know!” she moaned, as she threw her hands in the air. “That’s your job! You tell me!”

“Jesus, Connelley!” Wheeler shook his head. “We’re not ballerinas with guns! We’re a blunt force. If you’re asking us to carpet bomb New York,” he said incredulously, “that’s something we can discuss as an absolute last resort, but this isn’t what our men signed up for.” Wheeler gestured to his fellow Generals, “We all want this to end, just as badly as you do, but most of our soldiers don’t have it in ‘em to do this. It goes against their every instinct.”

Connelley smirked, “Then it sounds like you have your work cut out for you. The president wants a plan on his desk by the end of the day.”



The marines ran up the hill, while Sergeant Michaels drove beside them in his humvee, yelling hysterically for them to speed up, despite their complete lack of energy and will. They’d been running for hours. They barreled up the muddy ridge, single-file, passing a forty-five pound weight between each other. It started at the front, worked its way to the rear, then-- once at the rear-- was sent right back to the front.

“Hey Maggots! Are you really going to let private Conrad-Fucking-Willis embarrass you like this!?”

Conrad led the pack of marines by twenty or thirty yards. He was finishing first in every challenge, leading the Camp Rankings by a historic margin. He did so effortlessly, in an almost inexplicable way; he wasn’t the fastest or strongest, but he pushed himself harder than any of the other men; he always found a way to win.

To keep morale up, Conrad fell back with the rest of his comrades and nestled himself next to his hometown friend, Garrity.

“Man, my legs feel great,” Conrad smiled.

“Yah, yah, yah,” Garrity wheezed. “Take this, then.”

The marine behind Garrity passed him the weight and Garrity, in turn, passed the weight to Conrad, but tripped on a straggling root and collapsed in a heap of sweat and grime. Conrad

stopped on a dime and reached around Garrity's hulking body to pull him, and the weight, back up.

"You got this, G..." he encouraged.

"Hey, Garrity! You big, fat, Fuck!" the Sergeant screamed, as he pulled his humvee over to a complete stop. "We still have four miles! Get your ass up!"

"Sir!, Yes, sir!" Garrity squeezed through gritted teeth. He stumbled again and fell over.

The marines kept running. With each stride, a new wave of sweat soaked the mud. They faded off into the distance, as Conrad stayed back to help Garrity back onto his feet.

"Keep running, Willis! You fuckin maggot!"

"He needs my help, sir! Look at him! He's exhausted!" Conrad defended.

"What does this look like to you? The Make-A-Wish foundation? This is Boot Camp! Private Garrity needs to toughen-the-fuck-up!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!"

"Now, keep running, Private Willis! That's an order!"

"Sir! Yes, sir!" Conrad contemptuously spit out. He pretended to catch up with his company, but did so laboriously, to keep an eye on Garrity.

The Sergeant got out of his humvee and took a knee next to Garrity, who splayed out on the ground, heaving. The smell of stale coffee still lingered on Sarg's breath.

"Poor little Garrity, do you need a break?"

"I'm so tired, sir..."

"I'm sure you are, being an ugly-piece-of-shit must be exhausting." Micheals snarled.

"Now, get the fuck up and run, Private! This isn't a charity 5K, this is the US Marine Corps!"

"Yes sir. Will do, sir."

"You're like a little petunia, ya know that?" the Sergeant looked over at Conrad, who was catching up to the rest of his comrades, "You too, Private! You fucking petunia!"

Conrad kept running like he didn't hear him.

Garrity crawled with his tired limbs back onto his feet. He took a deep breath and began a light trot, which after several minutes, became a hobble. Sergeant Michaels got back in his humvee and sped past Garrity. His big, rubber tires dug into the earth, kicking up soil, and force-feeding Garrity a deluge of soggy mud and dirt, as he struggled to catch up with the rest of his company.

"Fuck me..." Garrity choked out in an exasperated wheeze.

"These terrorists are gonna run from you! And you need to catch them!" Michaels yelled to Alpha company. "Your country doesn't need pansy-ass petunias like Garrity and Conrad! They need guardians! They need protectors! They need patriots!"

At the Sergeant's orders, Conrad and Garrity dug their separate holes. They shoveled the dirt concurrently, developing a rhythm between each other like drummers in a percussion ensemble. The Sergeant sat in a ratty old lawn chair with a Diet Coke in his hand.

“Put your fuckin backs into it!” he shouted. “Stop pussy-footin and use those shovels like you mean it!”

It was two in the morning. They dug their ditches until they were waist deep.

“Get in your fuckin holes,” the Sergeant smiled. “I’ll be right back.”

They carefully climbed into their respective holes and waited.

The Sergeant came back a few minutes later with a hose. He turned it on. He blasted the two recruits with a glacial torrent, drenching Conrad and Garrity in ice-cold water. He aimed the hose at their chest and as the water hit their braced bodies, it fell and filled their ditches completely up. It was a brisk winter night in Wisconsin, as the two marines stood in their own frosty pools, befuddled and miserable.

“Sir!... we’re... dyin out here!” they choked.

The Sergeant chuckled, “Hey, don’t mind me, gentleman. I’m just watering my petunias...”



Caroline Connelley had seen many horrible things throughout her four-decade career as a public servant. In fact, she was responsible for a great deal of them. She began as an intern, working on Johnson’s Senate campaign, and rose through the ranks, eventually running for Senate herself. She spent six years as a Senator, three years as Majority Leader, and eight years as the Secretary of Defense. Now, she was the White House Chief of Staff, President Thompson’s most trusted counselor.

The idea that she was a “counselor” always felt rather silly, because counseling isn’t really what she did. She was a servant. She served at the whim of the people, and like any Senator, or Secretary, or Ambassador, that was her duty and oath. She served the people. Of course, there were just certain people she served more than others.

When the ASP first gained traction, it came as a complete surprise to Connelley. The entire movement was founded on this conspiracy that the wealthy were puppeteering American politicians. They were-- ‘of course,’ she laughed to herself-- but the idea that it was some grand conspiracy gave far too much credit to the Ultra-Rich; it wasn’t a conspiracy at all, it was just the system working the way it was supposed to. When she was in the Senate, it wasn’t voters who funded her re-election campaign. It was Ultra-Rich donors. That’s not to say she didn’t fight for the things she believed in, but she was put in power for a reason, and when her interests conflicted with those of her donors, yah, she had to make some compromises. It was a small price to pay for their patronage.

And while all that was true, she couldn’t understand how that justified the violence, the blood, the anarchy, the ASP plague. The extremists were psychopathic--she thought-- mailing

bombs, destroying store fronts, killing hard-working Americans all because they were blessed with more resources? Despicable, she thought to herself.

“So this is the President’s recommendation? Or his direct order?” The Chairman asked Connelley, as he finished reading a CIA document she had handed him several moments before.

Connelley snapped out of her day dream and rejoined the conversation.

“It’s an order.” she said, matter-a-factly.

“It’s an order... An order, huh?” The Chairman’s face turned red. He gnawed on the inside of his cheek for a short moment, then turned to Connelley and yelled, “Give me one good reason not to stage a coup right now!”

The other Generals shifted uncomfortably at the mention of the “c” word.

Connelley stood up, slowly, controlled, like she was an empress, or goddess, about to smite a lowly peasant. “Because you’re an American,” she spit through gritted teeth. “And because the plan you gave the president was dog-shit and because you took an oath to protect this country with your life.” She pointed to the striped flag in the corner of the room, but maintained eye contact with the Chairman, “If you really wanna try to topple the greatest democracy on Planet Earth, be my guest, but I’ll be the one laughing at your tribunal, and spitting on your grave when they hang you for treason.”

“Watch your fucking mouth, Connelley!” General Wheeler said as he shot her a disgusted look. “No one here wants to topple anything, we’re just trying to get answers here!” Wheeler points to the document in the Chairman’s hand, “Operation Enhanced Training doesn’t feel like the right answer.”

“Yah, well,” she shrugged, “it might not be. It might not be the right answer.” She skipped around the board-room table and slammed her dainty hand on Wheeler’s chest as she left the room, “But, it’s the only answer we got. So make it work!”



Alpha Company gathered in the airplane hangar in the Southeast corner of Fort McCoy. They stood at-ease, as a refreshing breeze wafted through the hangar, over the single Boeing 747 in the far left corner, over the empty infirmary beds that speckled the open space, and over the big ventilator-looking machines that sat idly on tables next to each bed.

The Sergeant paced back and forth, in full combat gear, as Alpha Company stood at ease.

“Alright, gentleman. This is where the fun starts. Enhanced Training! Dr. Hiemann will walk you through the protocol.”

Dr. Hiemann stepped forward and introduced himself. He was a short man with a bushy mustache. “Hi there...um... I’m Dr. Hiemann.” he said, shaking. “A couple years ago the US Department of Defense hired me and some colleagues to develop a technology for combat



training. Obviously, you can shoot stationary targets all you want, but it doesn't really prepare you for the endless variables of war. My colleagues and I--"

"We don't need a fucking history lesson, Doctor! Just give the boys a run-down."

Sergeant interrupted.

"You're right. Very sorry. Where was I?" Dr. Hiemann gathered himself, flustered, "So, we developed the 'Dream Machine.' We hook you up to these nodes," he said as he motioned to the suction cups that protruded out of wires attached to the big, ventilator-looking machines, "and the nodes can read and manipulate your brainwaves, distorting your sense of reality. It sounds far more sinister than it is," he laughs. "You'll each be hooked up to your own Dream Machine and given a sedative, where you'll fall asleep and your consciousnesses will be collectively induced into the same, lucid, computer-generated dream state."

"What does 'lucid' mean?" one of the marines asked curiously.

"It's... like... when something is really clear," another one offered.

"What? Use it in a sentence!" someone yelled from the back.

"Everything was lucid, when I fucked your mother--"

"How bout you idiots shut the fuck up!" Michaels screamed. "Let the man talk!"

Dr. Heimman shook his head to regain his composure, "So, uh, yes. Sergeant Michaels has programmed the various missions into the central computer, so every little detail you perceive in the dream will be courtesy of Sergeant's creativity."

Michaels shined his big, yellow teeth.

"Everything in the dream will feel real. That's the beauty of the technology. If you die in the dream, you'll wake up. Not to worry! But," Dr. Hiemann continued, "pain is experienced in your brain. Let this be a warning, even though it's a dream, you will feel the pain in its full capacity."

"Oh fun," Garrity whispered to Conrad.

"So..." Dr. Hiemann encouraged, "that means don't let yourself get shot! Not much different than real combat, except, of course, you can die. It'll go against your better instinct, but you're better off taking a bullet to the head than in the arm," he smiled, sadly. "Dying will send you right back here."

"What kind of missions are we doing?" one of the marines yelled.

"Oh boy!" Sergeant Michaels smirked, as he stepped in front of Dr. Hiemann and took center stage. "I'm so glad you asked!" Sergeant Michaels took a deep breath in, straightened his back and screamed with his whole body, "Ten-hut!"

All the recruits fell into rank.

"Alpha Company, your combat exercise is as follows," he said as he pulled out his sidearm, pointed it to the ground and looked down its sights. "You'll be split into squads of four. Each squad will be given intel on three extremist targets. Your job is to eliminate these targets by any means necessary. The first squad to finish will get one hundred points added to each of their individual rankings," he said as he gestured to the clipboard in his hand. "Right now, Private

Willis is in the lead by two hundred points. I couldn't tell you how," he said, angry about it, "but he is. If a worthless piece-of-shit like him can do it, so can you!"

"Wow, he really loves you," Garrity laughed under-his-breath to Conrad.

"Yah, I think he has a crush on me," Conrad smirked.

Conrad woke up, laying on the ground. He propped himself up, his whole body feeling sore, and glanced down to notice he was in completely different clothes. He was wearing a red Old Navy t-shirt, sun-bleached jeans and a pair of gray Converse, with small little tears in them. He stood in an empty college lecture room, with creaky wooden chairs, stacked in rows on top of each other, and an enormous, green chalkboard that stretched across the entire back wall. Harper, Garrity and Jackson, stood by his side, all looking just as confused as he was.

"Damn, I look hot," Garrity said as he patted his jeans down.

"So I guess this is how it goes. We're really in this bitch," Harper chuckled.

"Where are we? I thought this was combat training," Garrity complained.

"It is," Conrad said.

Garrity pointed to the chalkboard, "Then why does it feel like Michaels is gonna pull up a Powerpoint and teach us what 'lucid' means."

The four marines walked to the front of the classroom, where a long desk extended parallel the same length as the chalkboard. On it, lay backpacks, sunglasses, and an arsenal of small, discreet weapons-- knives, pistols, axes, as well as a pair of brass knuckles.

Garrity picked up the brass knuckles and tried them on, "Yew talkin' to meh!?"

"Alright, De Niro, simmer down." Conrad joked as he picked up one of the pistols and started loading it. He glanced around and noticed a small manilla envelope tucked between two of the lecture chairs. He walked over, picked the envelope up and opened it so the rest of the squad could see what was inside.

"What the fuck is that?" Jackson asked.

It was a map of campus, with three red circles that indicated their target objectives. Two of the circles overlapped, suggesting two of their targets were in the same location. Folded into the map was a Post-it note. Written on it were three names.

"Blackhawk, Fulcrum and Snorlax?"

"Snorlax? Like the big, fat Pokemon? The one that sleeps all the time?" Jackson blurted.

"Stop talking about Harper like that," Garrity teased.

"I guess these are our targets," Conrad insisted.

"Who names their kid Snorlax?" Jackson asked.

"Those are their code names you dumb-ass!" Harper snapped as he threw a couple magazines of ammo into his backpack. "You think terrorists use their first name?"

“Guess I never really thought about it,” Jackson admitted. “Well, how about Frank Sinatra? And Kenny Loggins? They were those guys that killed all those people in the Smithsonian last year.”

Garrity looked over at Conrad, “Please tell me he’s kidding.”

“This is hard to watch,” Conrad grinned.

“Those weren’t their actual names, you idiot!” Harper wailed. “Most attacks are orchestrated on the Dark Web. They use aliases to stay anonymous, and apparently,” he said as he pointed to Jackson, “trick dumbasses like you.”

“Seriously, dude? You’ve never heard Frank Sinatra?” Garrity complained as he started to sing. “Fly me to the moon...”

“Sorry, I’ve been a little preoccupied,” Jackson sneered as he gestured to all the weapons, “With the end of democracy and all.”

“Alright, alright, let’s just focus-up,” Conrad demanded.

The four men packed all their things and strutted out the lecture room’s door, guns in hand. They passed through the lobby, following the map, and jogged into a vast quad full of well-trimmed hedges and stone walking paths, where college-age students shuttled to class, textbooks under their arms, their eyes glued straight ahead.

“Yikes,” Conrad blurted, as he stopped in his tracks. “Um, let’s hide these bad boys,” he said as he tucked his gun into his waistband. “We don’t wanna scare anyone.”

“It’s just a dream! Chill out,” Harper snapped.

“Nah, we don’t wanna mess with this stuff,” Conrad promised. “We have no idea how the program will react. Treat this like a real mission,” he insisted, “and play it safe.”

“Alright, alright,” Harper whined, as he and the rest of the squad followed suit. “What do you think we’re doing here, anyway?”

“I don’t know, man. I would have thought these ASP bastards were hiding in a cave somewhere,” Jackson quipped.

“Yah, this doesn’t feel right...”

“Let’s just keep moving,” Conrad muttered.

The casually-dressed recruits made their way through campus. They were all about college-aged themselves. As they jogged through campus, following the map, students looked at them awkwardly, smiling with confusion, as the marines’ backpacks bobbed up and down like ocean buoys.

“Why are they lookin at us like that?” Harper complained.

“Hiemann said they’re just computer generated projections,” Jackson explained.

“English, please.”

“I have no idea,” Jackson laughed. “That’s all he said. I guess they’re supposed to feel as real as possible.” He looked at his comrades, sweating through their dorky clothes, and laughed. “If I were a student, I’d look at us funny too.”

The boys reached a big stone building on the far side of campus. They marched through its enormous marble archway and into its grand atrium.

“Garrity and I will take this stairwell. You and Jackson, take that one” Conrad said as he motioned to both, then double checked the map. “Remember, fourth floor. Room 415”

They ran up the stairs, pistols drawn, then burst into the fourth floor hallway. It was empty. Garrity and Conrad ran over to Harper and Jackson on the other side. They passed rooms 410 and 411.

“Should be that door over there,” Conrad whispered as he pointed farther down the hall.

“How do we wanna do this?” Garrity asked.

“Let’s just go, guns blazin” murmured Harper. They all looked to Conrad for the final call.

Conrad thought about it for a moment. On the one hand he wanted to carry out this mission as carefully and strategically as possible, then again, he also wanted to laugh in Michaels’ face when he broke the Camp Rankings record. He checked his watch. They already wasted fifteen minutes.

“Fuck it. Let’s just get this shit over with,” he whispered as he inched towards the door. “Follow my lead.”

The four marines made their way down the hall, towards room 415, where a wooden door was swung half open and a subtle light radiated out into the hallway’s carpeted floor. Conrad loaded his weight and, with the blunt force of his shoulder, burst through the remaining crack. All four men barreled through the doorway, pistols cocked.

The door busted from its hinges and flew into the room, where an elderly man jumped from his office chair and threw his hands into the air. Conrad pointed his gun steady, between the man’s eyes, “Are you Fulcrum?”

The man, who looked no younger than eighty years old, stood shaking, “No, I’m just a professor!” he cried. “Dr. Jacob Gardner.”

“He’s lying,” Harper urged. “Just shoot him! We don’t have time!”

“Shut up! Just check his things,” Conrad ordered.

Harper and Jackson patted the man down and rummaged through his desk. Garrity stood by the doorway, looking uneasy.

“Guys, he’s just an old man...” Garrity protested.

“An old man in a dream,” insisted Harper. “Stop taking this so seriously!”

Harper opened one of the man’s desk drawers and pulled out an envelope that was stamped with the ASP’s ensignia.

“Well look what we have here...” Harper smiled as he waved the envelope in front of the trembling professor.

“Please, why are you doing this? We’re all on the same side,” the old man cried. “Please, I’m an American. You’re an American. Please...”

“Is your codename Fulcrum?” Conrad asked again.

“Yes! But please, you need to understand--”

“We don’t have time, Conny! Just shoot him!” Harper yelled.

Conrad looked down at his watch. They’d wasted eighteen minutes.

“I hate this shit,” Conrad said as he pulled the trigger and put four bullets into the man’s chest. Blood dribbled out of the professor’s lips, as his corpse coughed out its final breath, spraying the men in liquid gore.

“Fuck!” Jackson squealed, “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!”

“Ew! It’s in my mouth!” cried Garrity as he clawed at his tongue, “It’s in my mouth! It’s in my mouth!”

Conrad looked at the body in horror. It even smelled real.

“I thought his body would just disappear or some shit,” Conrad complained. “I didn’t realize it would be this bloody!”

“You’re a bunch a pansies,” scolded Harper, as he looked over at Jackson and Garrity, who were verging on tears in the corner. “It’s just a dream.”

“Why are we training on old men?” Garrity wailed. “I thought we were out here killin ASP’s! Evil people n’ shit!” he said as he pointed to the old man. “At least, people that shoot back.”

“I don’t know,” Conrad admitted. “Michaels is probably just fucking with us.”

“Well that asshole has a sick sense of humor,” Garrity moaned. “That could have been my grandpa.”

“But it’s not,” Harper assured him. “It’s a dream! Let’s just get our shit together and move out. We got a mission.”

“He’s right. Mission first. We can talk about this after,” Conrad promised.

The men marched back down the stairs, through the atrium, and into the greater quad. They sprinted across campus, students shooting them glances of worry and concern. As Harper tried to keep up, his short legs tired, he climbed up the campus’s hilly incline, putting his left foot in front of his right, his right foot in front of his left, until one of his feet caught a snag in the stone-cobbled path and his pistol was jostled loose from his waistband. It skidded across the ground, landing in front of a young blonde-haired girl, who looked at the gun, squealed, and ran off in the opposite direction.

“Careful!” Conrad scolded.

“Nice one, Private Parts,” Garrity teased.

Harper’s cheeks turned flush, “Yah, yah, yah...”

Conrad led the pack, every few minutes checking his map, and ushered the men through another large archway into a busy library. Hundreds of students sat at various tables, studying their books, writing notes, typing furiously on their laptops.

“How are we supposed to kill our targets? There’s way too many people,” Garrity moaned.

Conrad turned and saw a security guard sitting at a kiosk in the far corner of the library and motioned for the men to follow him in retreat, as they went back outside, unnoticed, to re-strategize.

“No pain, no gain,” Harper pointed out.

“He does have a point. If we’re gonna do this, we might as well do this,” Conrad offered. “Michaels will yell at us regardless.”

“This doesn’t feel fucked up to you guys?” Garrity squeaked.

“Oh no, it most definitely does,” Conrad admitted. “But I’m here to win. We’re already balls deep. We might as well finish the job.”

“He’s right. I’m for it. Anything to piss Michaels off,” Jackson laughed.

“Alright, we doin this?” Conrad asked.

The men took their backpacks off and assembled their weapons together. Conrad had three pistols, two knives, a throwing axe and a pair of brass knuckles. He signaled the marines to follow him and ran into the library with ice in his heart.

Conrad pulled his twigger twice and shot the security guard in the chest. The entire library erupted in hysteric screams as everyone dropped to the floor.

“Shut the fuck up!” Harper bellowed.

Garrity and Jackson ran to opposite sides of the library and secured the exits.

Conrad jumped on top of one of the tables, “Blackhawk! Which one of you is Blackhawk!?” Conrad screamed.

“How bout Snorlax? Which one ya computer-generated fuckers is Snorlax!” Harper added.

Everyone fell silent. Harper paced around the library looking for an ASP terrorist, but all he saw were trembling students.

A middle aged woman stood, sobbing, “Please don’t hurt these kids,” she cried. “Please, I beg of you, please...”

Harper ran over to her and pointed his gun between her eyes, “Blackhawk?” he sneered mockingly. “Is that you?”

“Yes, yes, just please don’t hurt these kids. I’m Blackhawk. Take me. Just take me,” she sobbed. “I did it. I was the one that bombed it. Please! Take me! Please!”

Harper put a bullet in her forehead without thinking twice. Her skull exploded like a water balloon. Her brains splattered against the back wall and showered a group of students to her rear in liquid carnage. The library erupted again into deafening chaos.

“Plan B! Plan B!” Conrad yelled.

He jumped off the table, took out his knife, and stabbed the nearest teenage boy. Then he whipped his pistol around and shot a group of twenty-something girls. He turned to see Harper strangling a burnette, while Jackson was closing his eyes and shooting students at random. It was just a dream, Conrad kept telling himself. It was just a dream.

He kicked over a small girl with glasses and pounded her with the butt of his gun. He threw his axe at another student and it impaled him in the chest. Garrity was securing the exit and every student that tried to escape was met with his bullets. The entire library was spattered with gore as the four men killed every student they possibly could. Snorlax was somewhere in the library. They needed to make sure he didn't escape.

The campus security force barged in through the entrance, twenty heavily armed guards, and shot Garrity down with ease. Conrad turned around just in time to watch the bullet fly through his best friend's eye socket.

"Conrad! Watch out!" Jackson yelled. Conrad ducked behind one of the book shelves and crawled over to Jackson and Harper.

"There's too many of them!" Jackson cried. "What do we do? What do we do?"

Harper turned to Conrad, "You think we got Snorlax? We had to have gotten him. We killed most of them."

"It's hard to say," Conrad admitted.

"I don't wanna get shot, guys! You heard Dr. Hiemann!" Jackson cried. "My cousin got shot once and he said it was the most excruciating pain he's ever felt and--"

"So what do you wanna do then?" Conrad asked.

"I think we got him," Harper said under his breath. "I think we got him."

The guards' bullets flew around them like horizontal rain.

Harper chuckled at himself, "I think we only have one choice. This should be all kinds of fun." He checked his pistol's magazine. Eight bullets left. He smiled and turned back to his comrades, "See you boys back at camp."

Harper raised his pistol, rested it on his temple and pulled the trigger. His skull shattered into a million pieces, as blood cascaded down his mangled face.

"Fuck!" Jackson exclaimed.

"I guess it's our turn." Conrad smirked, the whole exercise a twisted Hell.

"Michael's is one sick son of a bitch," Jackson groaned.

The two marines opened their mouths, stuck their guns down their throat, and shot themselves without a second's hesitation.



General Wheeler stared blankly ahead, wallowing in the silence of everyone's despair. Not a single official, out of nearly fifteen of them, knew what to say or do. Connelley insisted she did, and most of the Generals valued this, less because they agreed strategically-- or for that matter morally-- but because they needed at least one answer and no one could offer another.

“Why isn’t the president giving these orders, himself? At least a phone call or something,” Wheeler asked.

“Because he’s not a fuckin idiot,” Connelley insisted. “Do you know what would happen if the president green-lighted something like this, directly?”

“Why is this happening at all then?” General Dillion of the US Army asked.

“Because it NEEDS to!” she bellowed. “Our country is falling apart and this is our Hail Mary!”

She took a deep breath, “The President needs to keep his hands clean. When you topple the ASP’s leadership, this country will need a leader to rally behind. When those terrorists are gone, this country will be free. And your men will be heroes.”

“They’ll be murderers,” Wheeler objected.

“What’s your point?” Connelley asked.

“You throw around the word ‘terrorists’ like it’s Osama Bin Laden and a whole buncha fuckin sociopaths,” Wheeler yelled as he ruffled through his briefcase. He pulled out a fax sent over by the NSA.

“Last night, a bomb went off at Facebook’s headquarters in Menlo Park. You know who the prime suspect is right now?” Wheeler asked Connelley.

“Who?” she asked.

“A twenty nine year old post grad student at UC Berkeley. She studied physics and mechanical engineering and was recruited to the ASP after her mother died from cancer. She couldn’t afford the medical expenses,” Wheeler looked up from the document and crumpled it in his hand. “Her code name is Blackhawk and I have a million other cases just like her. They’re just a whole bunch of normal-ass people fed up with the system.”

“They’re terrorists! Radical extremists! Normal people don’t blow things up,” Connelley objected.

“This country was built by extremists! Revolutionaries! You think George Washington didn’t blow things up?”

“He did it for his country,” she insisted.

“No, he did it for his personal rights,” Wheeler laughed, “then formed a country after. If we ask our men to kill their own citizens in the name of patriotism,” he shook his head sadly, “then there’s no country left that’s worth fighting for.”

Connelley pursed her lips as a bead of sweat dripped down her cheek.

“Nothing great ever happened without a little bit of sacrifice,” General Rogers muttered from the back of the room. He stood up, puffed out his chest and spoke a little louder, “I’d rather act and be wrong, then watch this country burn, because we didn’t have the guts to stand for something.”

A few of the Generals nodded their heads in agreement.

“Finally, some sense!” Connelley exhaled. “That leaves us with Operation Enhanced Training.” She smiled, “Wanna walk us through it, Chairman?”



“Not really,” he said sarcastically.

“Well go on, anyway,” she demanded.

The Chairman glanced over the document one more time, then let out a breath, “DARPA has been developing this technology that allows people to share dreams. It’s called the Dream Machine.” He ran his hand through his buzzed hair and frowned “But, it’s been finicky, and they don’t see it working anytime soon.”

“Go on,” she urged.

“So the CIA drafted up Operation Enhanced Training. They tried it once on their own operatives, but it was only moderately successful. Apparently, it requires a certain amount of peer pressure to cement the illusion.”

“Illusion?” Wheeler asked as a bowling ball grew in his stomach.

“Operation Enhanced Training is a magic trick. New recruits show up to training camp to participate in what they believe to be ‘combat exercises.’ They’ll get a long spiel from one of our engineers, about how the technology works, and how it’s indistinguishable from real-life.”

“But you just said the Dream Machine doesn’t work?” one of the Generals asked.

“It doesn’t need to,” Wheeler said, as he put it all together. “They just need to *believe* it worked. You sedate them, fly ‘em into the field, and have them wake up with a mission objective.”

“Exactly,” Connelley smiled.

“But how do you make sure they carry out the objective?” one of the Generals asked.

“You incentivise them. Have them compete against each other in camp,” Connelley explained. “Create a ranking system and dangle a higher paying position in front of them.” She stood back up and stretched her arms out in front of her, “But, the only way this illusion works is if the soldiers have a cruel Drill Sergeant.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” the Chairman objected.

“Like Wheeler said, there’s not a soldier in the armed forces who enlisted to kill their own citizens. Even in a dream.” she admitted with a shrug. “The key to this whole operation is having the soldiers believe their Drill Sergeant is creating this dream. That he’s sick and abusive and twisted and that’s why it’s populated by a whole bunch of civilians.”

The whole board room remained silent in horror.

“What happens when the soldiers find out?” Wheeler asked.

“They won’t,” the Chairman muttered. “They’ll kill themselves expecting to wake back up at camp. It’s genius.”