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The snow was ankle deep when the soldiers entered Detroit. A black battle tank rumbled alongside at a volume to deafen and the heavy metal tracks turned all objects in its path to a finely tilled powder. The huge hulking metal beast sauntered past useless husks of abandoned cars rusted red and oxidizing from inattention, on its way into the city. The young men mustered only weeks before never imagined that in their lifetime they would walk with rifles drawn, safety off, into an American city, chosen and charged with the mission to reclaim it.

This is what happened.

The city laid in front of them. The symbol of the auto industry that became the example of economic instability had a very different identity in the months before the soldiers started walking. Now the buildings stood in the distance as dinosaurs of metal and rock. No more animated than fossils, they shouldered to the sky and reflected the dull gray from the wall of clouds behind them.

One foot in front of the other, the forces came and took their first building. The giant black edifice just south of the city towered impossibly up close. The soldiers called the building 'Quarantine', but the name made little sense now. Uncle Sam became the location's third owner in six months, an observation few made as they loaded equipment and people into its mouth. Forward squads already had freed the building and some civilians huddled around the base of the tower, their faces shocked with relief. A man with round glasses and a red tie too pristine for the circumstances seemed the most relieved of all. He hugged the men in uniform so tight they recoiled, one by one until he ran out of energy. It didn't take long. The liberated had spent a lot of energy in the past couple of weeks trying not to die.

Platoons pressed on and fortified positions in the city. The front lines hit the city limits and broke like a wave, tide-pooling into neighborhoods and high value areas. They did so at the ready, looking for signs of men and women dressed as police officers or city sanitation workers. Eyes peeled, fingers on triggers, ears listening for the sound or the smell of a chainsaw.

The enlisted encountered no resistance. They found only small huddled groups hiding together in tiny self-declared sanctuaries. The soldiers expected enemy forces. What they found was people. They were bloody, battered, and broken but at least still alive. The sentries found tired and tarnished faces with no truculence, their hands smeared in dust and shame.

The scene repeated all over the city. Neighborhoods entered by uniforms were greeted with hands held high in the air, over and over, street by street. Forces traveled with caution among the dark buildings and stared in wonder. The power was cut before the operation began, a move that didn't seem necessary in retrospect. This city was drained of its energy long before it lost electricity.

Around the arriving forces were sights familiar to them from their training or from the news footage they had watched in the weeks prior. There was a stage, a collection of twisted together metal and plastic. It was bumpy in some places like it had been hurried in place, before the blood that now covered it. The thick red layer had dried in pools, like

paint applied too thick. It flaked and curled when touched. The video screens surrounding the stage offered no explanation and only existed in a dull, dark defiance.

The stage and screens sat in Hart Plaza at the foot of the Detroit Renaissance Center, its metal and glass columns gliding effortlessly into the dry winter air. There was a large collection of people remaining around the area, most of them turning their backs to blunt the breeze knifing off the river. A forward team had also been in this area, and left with the one they came for.

Outside the city a cloud of media waited like sprinters on a starting block. They carried recorders and cameras beneath the fully gassed helicopters which hovered like kites in the flat gray sky. When word went out the swarm descended. Cameras, microphones, light reflectors, hairspray and strands of long stringy hair pushed behind ears with anxious hands became the landscape on every corner of the streets turned brown and white.

Pretty men and women conducted interviews with confused, random soldiers who cracked smiles and waved to loved ones back home in the audience. The enlisted men knew their loved ones were watching. Everyone, all over the world, watched every second with a hand held over their mouth, eyes fixed on the feed for answers. The comely collection of reporters never bothered to mention their contribution. They never suggested that they, in part, caused the carnage around them by cramming their foot on the gas of hysteria when some semblance of clarity was crucial to protecting the psyche of the public they were charged to inform.

The liberated men and women walked hunched down, freezing, through dirty streets to buses. They folded fabric over their heads to calm the cold but also to avoid the light. Media and soldiers referred to them as 'refugees', but that didn't accurately describe the men and women whom they found in this dead city. They were the witnesses. They saw not only what happened, but they knew their motivations for being there in the first place. Many came from miles around for a chance to save their lives and others came from farther to follow. They arrived in the city with chin held high, to join a man they believed, now they crawled on the concrete among the ashes of the utopia that slipped through their hands like water. The shame of believing in something that collapsed is the only thing that the residents had in common, and that shame ensured their silence.

The huddled men and women were processed and counted, the paperwork filed somewhere. They pointed their palms at the stars and stripes and swore to never stray away again. They changed their names and existed in a fugue state, missing memories from a year of their lives that no one will ever even know to ask about. They had families and futures and children, none of them ever aware.

They hid from the condemnation. Their history was demagogued and dismissed. Sworn off and sold out. Excluded and ostracized. Forgotten and forsaken.

Abandoned.

Their memories and experiences were buried so deep that no radiation will ever escape. Their history became unspoken in polite company. The only people who spoke of the events of that year in Detroit sold uninformed opinions of what actual atrocities occurred

between the buildings. The city was rebuilt, repopulated, and slicked with paint. Their lies would crystallize and dry, lacquered into the woodwork.

Because of this, the cycle simply started over again. The wheel of history reloaded for another lesson.

What humanity failed to understand is just how desperately they needed the witnesses to tell their story.

2

Jack drifted off from the conversation. He stared across the street to the brick buildings with high windows. Above them, balconies jutted out in front of sliding glass doors. Some of the doors were open and Jack's attention had been stolen by one with a tall white oscillating fan. He was happy the damned winter was over and that May was so warm and welcoming.

Birmingham was the most affluent suburb of Detroit and it reminded you with every sight and sound. Late model BMW and Mercedes cruised down winding streets and stopped in front of stores selling Tiffany bracelets and Movolo watches. The women wore strapless sundresses, giant sunglasses, and designer shoes that cost far more than the weekly salaries of the store clerks who catered to them. The men wore sport coats with polo shirts and pressed slacks even though the sun blazed. Everywhere pedestrians walked small dogs that looked like dusters with ribbons.

"Did you hear about it, Jack?"

"What?"

"They're doing a piece on Wellco Sunday."

Jack snapped out of it. He looked at Tyson. The 6 foot 5 inch black man attracted a lot stares in a town like this. Tyson clarified, "The 60 Minutes thing. Frank Fisher himself is interviewed."

Jack was back in the conversation. "Yeah, I heard. You know very well they're going to ask him about the price of the vaccine. It's like they're going to make the point for us."

The three men lunched on the sidewalk. They sat at a table made of braided iron. Jack, a thin man in his early 50s with gray hair that gave him a paternal demeanor, reached for the tea cup in front of him. He sipped and swallowed. "What did you think, Max?"

Max leaned back into his chair, a half eaten sandwich in front of him. A tight white t-shirt and jeans framed his slight build. His hair was cut short and he wore thick stubble on his face. His eyes were deep blue. "It was what I have come to expect," he said with no emotion.

Jack held out a hand, "Well, that's what I meant. This is our opportunity."

"This is what the world is becoming. It will only get worse."

Jack forked a mouthful of omelet. Best not to argue, he thought.

Max looked at his sandwich, "I've been busy with the trucks."

"When will they be ready?" Tyson asked.

"Still trying to get that nailed down."

Jack swallowed. "What's the delay?"

"It is important for everything to happen simultaneously," Max rubbed his beard, "but it's proven difficult to arrange for that many operations to happen at one time."

Tyson said, "Is it the personnel?"

"No," said Max. "We have a guy in every truck. It's just the timing. We need this one to go well. It will set up everything else."

"If there is anything you need just let me know," Tyson said, reaching for the glass in front of him.

"There is. I need you to head down to Florida," Max leaned over the arm of his chair and fished a newspaper out of his bag. "There are budget cuts coming in the St. Petersburg SWAT team."

Jack chuckled. "How do you find this stuff?"

"I look for it," Max said and turned back to Tyson. "I want you to bring me the talent."

Tyson grabbed the newspaper. Large block letters screamed about another Ebola outbreak above the fold. "How many do you need me to recruit?"

Max took a bite. "All of them."

"If we are talking about talent then you should also look at this," Jack interrupted as he handed Max a folder.

"The computer guy," said Max.

"I think his name is John," said Jack trying to recall the details.

"This is the guy from Anonymous?" said Max.

Jack pulled a stack of emails from his bag and set them on the table. The bottom sheets

soaked up the remains of a tea spill. "Ah, here it is, his name is Josh. This guy has already cracked into the Wellco systems a couple of times. He isn't just a member of Anonymous, he is the best of them. A lot of their people agree on this."

Tyson and Max nodded.

"Sounds good," said Max. "Any bad news?"

"I can't find any."

"Do you think that he will be with us for the long run or the short?" said Max.

"We won't know until we ask," said Jack. "But the fact that he runs with Anonymous is promising."

"It is. I wish we had him for the trucks mission. It would be better if we knew their route planners and schedules."

Jack smirked as he put the emails back in the folder. "How are we going to get him?"

"That's on you," said Max. "You found him. Bring him to us," he looked at Tyson. "You're going to need money. Drive me back to the apartment so I can give it to you."

Jack opened his mouth to protest.

Max turned back to him. "Is there anything you need from me Jack?" Jack lost his nerve and closed his mouth. Max looked pleased. "It's quite a find, you just have to reel him in. Bring him to a meeting and I'll do the rest."

"What if he's not interested? What if he won't come?"

"Then I will be disappointed in you," Max said as he stood up. He tossed a fist of cash onto the table and walked away with Tyson.