

## **Project T-140c**

By Jason Dean Sharpe

I slid my way into the lobby of Hannah's building and down the tiny flight of stairs like a six year old on a Slip 'n' Slide. I felt as though I had been scooped up and dipped into a giant bucket of water. It had been pouring for well over 24 hours and nothing in the city was dry anymore; not even things with a roof over head. If I were able to reach in and pull out my liver, it would probably wring out like a wet dish towel. Every inch of me was soaked right through to the spongy marrow. With such disastrous weather, it wouldn't seem worth it to most people to leave their apartments for a simple interview, but the details of the job had been so obscure, so secretive. I had been drawn in on the allure of it all. Besides, I had already interviewed for three other jobs this month and not one of them looked promising. I was beginning to reek of desperation.

In what felt like a lifetime ago Hannah was a girl I helped through basic training without giving too hard a time. I had recently run into her at a little café called Club Nette. It was amateur poetry night. She had gotten up to the mike and read a few poems of her own which were pretty good, for a kid her age. One in particular called "Silent Musings" showed a lot of promise. She could probably get it published if she wanted to, but what did I know, four years of dabbling with writing and I hadn't so much as finished one short story. I had waited until she stepped down from the mike to walk up and say my own hello for old time's sake. She had even remembered that I had dabbled with writing a little before I joined up. After I had told my

current unemployed status, she thought I might be interested in a gig which paid to be creative and “kind of write”, especially considering my recent handicap.

The sound of sloshing watery footsteps echoed through the hall and was a stinging reminder of how tedious my life would probably be until I got older and was forced into a wheelchair. A small piece of shrapnel was lodged in-between my ankle and my Achilles tendon. The doctors weren't too sure of what might happen if they removed it. As a result of their indecision my whole left foot was constantly swollen resembling a rubber glove filled with the fresh ground meat of a pregnant pig. I was forced to buy two different pairs of boots with the left one being three sizes bigger than the right and on a day like today it was damn near impossible to keep Mother Nature out. Days like today will get to you if you really let them. I was getting better at trying not to.

“Did you find it all right? I figured this would be a fine place to meet seeing as though I'm on the ground floor. The front stairs weren't too rough, were they? Holy fuckballs, you're soaked!” Hannah looked and acted as though she was only sixteen years old but I knew for a fact she was actually eighteen and a bit. She was one of those rare cases that managed to slip through the cracks who claim to be of legal age to join up, but wasn't. She had made it two years before her parents showed up with her older sisters ID and death certificate and both sides, not wanting any kind of backlash, agreed to go their separate ways.

I remember telling her during basic training that no one would judge her for quitting, but she would always just smile and say she was doing it for her sister. She was so proud to have made it through in one piece, so leaving must have left a fair sized hole in her. Apparently her sister's dream had been to join up and make something of her life through the military, but she was killed by a drunk driver before she could.

“I found it just fine, Hannah. You always were good with directions.” I pulled off my boots, embarrassed by the toddler sized wading pool that spilled out of the left one.

Hannah told me not to worry about it as she exclaimed, “I'm super psyched you came! I've been pestering Dr. J, that's my boss, ever since we ran into each other that he needed to meet you and that you would be an amazeballs addition to the team and he finally agreed to give you a go. He's given me an assignment to give you so I'll give ya a quick tour of my castle and then we'll get you started, ok?”

I stood in the middle of her hallway, dazed and confused by the whirl wind that was Hannah as she dipped into the bathroom to grab me a towel. On the wall in front of me was a six foot tall painting of a beautiful young blond girl. Her skin was green and her face suggested a serenity I had not known for quite some time now.

When Hannah returned from the bathroom she noticed my interest. “That was my sister, Erica. I call it E the Goddess. This one behind you is Shouting Goddess, also my sister, but in a different state of mind.”

I used the towel she had brought me to take my head from sopping wet to a mild state of damp and turned to view the painting on the wall across from the one I had been looking at. It was of the same girl, but this one was painted red and her mouth was open wider than any human could possibly open their mouth. I could almost feel the vibrations hitting my ears from whatever it was she was shouting. Her slinky brown eyes glowed with seething rage and I wondered if this is what Hannah thought her sister was doing in the afterlife.

“Did you do these, Hannah?” Hannah smiled slightly embarrassed after I asked her.

Taking me by the hand gently, she led me through the apartment. It was filled with art leaning up against walls or furniture in various stages of being worked on. Some paintings were similar to those on the wall in the entrance while others depicted statues of what looked like horses or maybe deer of some sort.

The tiny dwelling had an earthy feel to it and I was amazed that someone so close to being a tree hugger could fit in so well with soldiers.

A twinkle lit up the corners of her baby blue eyes. “Girls gotta do something with her spare time or she’s liable to get herself in trouble, Chief.” I smiled at her repeating the words I had once spoken to her some years before.

She sat me down at a small desk near the only window I could see in the place. It dawned on me then that Hannah could probably make it in any environment because she was so damn smart and loveable. It would take a special kind of asshole not to like Hannah. She was strong enough to commit and excel at whatever task she set her mind to. That was why I pushed her so hard and helped her when I could. If I didn’t know any better I’d have thought I was becoming a believer in Karma.

Either way it was good to see her again. “I gotta say I’m pretty intrigued by this whole situation. What kind of Hannah Antics are you getting me into here?”

“Well, I’m not allowed to say very much. Dr. J is a total genius and we are working on some cutting edge stuff that I know you’d love to be a part of. It requires a good solid imagination and the ability to think on the fly. The fact that I know you are loyal and can be trusted are big pluses for ya. Today, the boss man has given me a very simple assignment to give you and if he likes what you do he will bring you in for an interview. Sound cool?”

I smiled proudly at the five foot six teenager standing in front of me now. She looked, sounded and bounced around like most teens do, but she was more grown up than a lot of the women I had known. In my opinion the military had lost a good soldier when they made her leave. Or, perhaps in some regard, they had managed to keep her after all.

Opening the folder Hannah had just placed on the desk in front of me, I found several blank pieces of loose leaf paper inside under a single sheet of paper with a typed written sentence on it: Create a character, leaving no detail untold. I looked back up at Hannah, curiously.

“Those are the instructions. You have no restrictions and will receive no help from me regarding these instructions. You have three hours to complete your assignment at which point I will take the folder from you and I will give it to my boss as soon as I see him tomorrow. If he likes what he reads I’ll let you know when you can come in for an interview. If he doesn’t like what he reads, you can hit the Help Wanted ads again. Sound like a plan?” Hannah said with extreme authority.

Two days later, I found myself sitting down in an empty waiting room filled with horribly uncomfortable plastic chairs in front of an octogenarian blue haired secretary named Phyllis. I knew her name was Phyllis because that’s what the name plate on her desk said. I supposed it could be the name plate for another secretary who worked there, but after careful examination of her wrinkled grey skin from a safe distance away, I was pretty sure the name went with this woman in particular.

She had been filing the same nail for over an hour now and I wondered if the file was just dull or her nails were coated with cement. My head would explode if I sat staring at something directly in front of my face for so long, but suspected from the sounds of her breathing she might actually be asleep, filing with her eyes open.

I waved my hand in the air at her casually to see if she would react. “Shouldn’t be too long now Mr. McLellan, I apologize for the wait. Mr. Adams should be along shortly. His flight arrived late from the far left coast.” she answered without so much as a glance up from her nails.

Giving Phyllis the old one thumb salute, I crossed my arms leaning back on the chair gently. I could feel the flimsy imported plastic frame bend under the weight of me. I probably shouldn’t be testing my luck with my one good leg but I was nervous and often did things I shouldn’t when I was unsure of a situation. It got my adrenaline pumping and helped me think clearer.

The obnoxiously large, steel letters of the company stared down at me from directly behind the frail little secretary still sawing away at the tip of her finger. It was the only place in the building the companies name appeared. It wasn’t even on the directory in the main lobby. I’d had to walk up to the security guard and ask him if I was in the right place. He assured me that I was and accompanied me to a small security room behind his desk where he proceeded to take my picture and digital finger prints before sending me on my way to the basement with a brand new visitors id pass. It seemed a little over kill to me to be scanning finger prints of someone who was only in the building for a job interview, but I took it as a good sign that these potential employers had money to spend and secrets to protect. Both of these were positive aspects for a company I had never even heard of and was not able to find one piece of information on when I searched the internet.

Faisal Adams was a whopping six foot seven and most of it looked harder than crystalline polished granite. He made me feel small at six foot two, so I was pretty sure Phyllis felt like an ant as he walked past her desk and towards me with a starry blank expression in his diamond sparkling baby blue eyes. He was wearing black. He looked like the type of man who always wore black. Black suit, black shirt, black tie, black shoes, black socks and yes I’m sure if we were to strip all of that off we would find underneath it all Faisal Adams was almost certainly wearing black boxer briefs. We shook hands exchanging very little in the way of pleasantries as I followed him into his office behind old cement nails.

The décor in this basement office was simple enough. The walls were bare, track lighting on the ceiling, a lawyer’s lamp next to a laptop on the stately steel desk, a standing brass lamp next to a never-been-sat-on leather couch and at least a hundred black metal filing cabinets were

scattered about the room. What looked like a cylindrical fish tank straight out of a Chinese dim sum restaurant was the center of attention in this office.

“Nice fish.” I said.

Faisal sank into a burgundy leather office chair that must have been tailor made for his circus freak of a body and sinking his elbows into the plush arm rests he touched the tips of his index fingers together directly under his eleven inch nose.

“Are you into fish, Gavin?” A smile formed on Faisal’s top lip as the bottom lip frowned simultaneously.

I immediately felt as though I had just told this behemoth sitting in front of me that I had gotten a little too friendly with his grandmother the night before and decided from here on in to speak only when spoken to, like they taught us in basic. “Not even to eat.”

“I find them relaxing. The sound of the filter gurgling water, the radiant glow of the light shining out through the water and the fish themselves swimming about, just doing their thing are visually very, very relaxing. These fish here? Eat pretty much anything, as long as I chop it up small enough, especially the big one. His name’s Snorklehuahua.”

At that moment I thought it was very possible the man sitting in front of me may well be preparing to kill me and feed pieces of my mutilated body parts to his killer pet fish. The cut of his jib and the way the air hissed with electricity around him told me straight out he didn’t play well with others. I was only granted a momentary reprieve when his phone rang. He asked me to hang on a minute, the slick black receiver looking like a toy in his hand as he lifted it to his elephant’s ear. He could have two minutes as far as I was concerned.

Swiveling his chair away from me to talk, I turned to the fish tank allowing it to hypnotize me for a moment. I began searching the room for a sign that this was all being filmed, that at some point soon a good looking young celebrity would rush into the room telling me how sorry he was but they had totally made a fool of me and would I mind them putting it on broadcast television for the public’s viewing pleasure?

Enraptured by the fish tank I found Faisal’s favourite fish. It really did resemble a Chihuahua, but it looked like it was playing a little harmonica more than it was wearing snorkel gear. I wondered what its proper name was and how many people Faisal had fed to it. I also noticed music playing subtly that I hadn’t heard before. It was as though it was coming from inside the tank where lights danced and flashed in perfect rhythm with a song that I recognized

but couldn't quite put my finger on. I sat there mesmerized, trying to place the song, the words to it balancing at the very tip of my tongue. Another fish caught my eye and I shook my head and blinked repeatedly as it resembled a poodle. Never had I come across so many fish that looked like dogs. I decided to name it Schmoodles and had a good laugh about it in my head.

"Well, it looks like your references check out. You managed to impress some rather influential people before you were injured. Mind if I ask how it happened?" Faisal had left the door to the office open and a fly the size of a golf ball had flown in to join us. He stabbed at the air in front of his face openhandedly, brought his closed fist down in front of his stomach and squeezed the life out of that poor *Musca domestica* before opening his palm and letting the corpse fall to the ground in front of him without missing a beat. I had never seen a big man move so swiftly.

I scratched at my left leg, a nasty habit I have whenever anyone asked about my injury. I wondered who he had been talking to and what they had told him. The references I had written down and given to Hannah at her apartment were all on the up and up, but the really influential people wouldn't have been easy for a lot of regular folk to track down. The details of my accident were known to few and that's the way I preferred it.

I smiled, giving him my standard answer. "Cut myself shaving."

He raised five sausage like digits up to his mouth wiping whatever remnants of dead fly carcass were left on his hand across his lower face.

"You are useless to us if we can't trust you Gavin, as useless as moist pork in a Jewish deli. But we've looked at your military record and you did some excellent work in your short lived career. We'd like to give you a chance. How about we get out of this basement and I'll introduce you to the man in charge here?" he said as he rose out of his chair motioning towards the office door with his carcass free hand.

I waved casually at Phyllis as we walked briskly past her desk towards the elevator. I stared at the back of Faisal's massive melon as he stopped and pushed the button on the electric panel on the wall in front of him. Faisal stepped aside as the door to the elevator opened, clearing the way for me to walk on.

Faisal took one step backwards inside the elevator pushing the 13 button as he continued looking at Phyllis filing her nails. The panels buttons all lit up simultaneously. Music started

pouring out of the speakers from the ceiling above us. I felt an uneasy queasy feeling in my stomach as the buttons put on a light show that made me feel like I was in the middle of Close Encounters of the Third Kind. Faisal stood absolutely still while the tiny electric closet vaulted towards the thirteenth floor. The whole while I squinted my eyes to try and see if he was even breathing.

We came to a sudden stop. The doors opened and Faisal turned sideways to reveal a stunning Amazonian blond in a black dress suit wearing leather thigh high stiletto boots. She wore a hot pink silk scarf with baby blue bullets patterned over it tied snugly around her neck which did a poor job of distracting any eyes within viewing distance from her chasming cleavage. I immediately started dictating a letter to Penthouse in the back of my mind.

“You must be Gavin. I am Miss Bell. I’ve been anxious to meet you all day. Well done on making it this far. Would you care to follow me?” The buxom blond turned walking away from the elevator as Faisal raised an eyebrow, smiling as though he knew every thought that was going through my mind. He raised his hand, motioning me out of the elevator so I followed Miss Bell while doing my best not to drool all over the shiny marble floor. The goliath in black trailed not far behind me.

She walked for what seemed like forever through a sea of willowing white walls; all the while her stiletto heels clicking and clacking a strong steady beat on the delicate floor beneath her powerful toned calves.

The walls were a shade of white that had me wishing I had worn sunglasses: between the glare coming off of them and the amazon heeled death march ringing in my ears, I worried I was about to come down with a migraine. I rubbed my eyes with the palm of my hand quickly and when I pulled it away the amazon had come to a full stop in front of me.

Startled by the weight and grip of Faisal’s hand on my shoulder, I let out a mild grunt as Miss Bell turned to reveal the awesome spectacle that was her chest. No stranger to uncomfortable moments, I averted my eyes quickly from her mountainous melons up to her emerald green eyes. I was momentarily flown to another universe of beauty and pleasure I’m sure few men have ever had the privilege to experience. The sweet scent that wafted off of her body made me heady and dizzy as my chest tightened and my stomach churned.

“This is where all the magic happens, Gavin.” She said smiling as she reached behind her to open the door. I had to stop my hand from checking my crotch to see if I had pitched a pant teepee. Walking briskly by her, I sucked in as much of her sweet nectar scent as I could and entered a room that immediately made me dizzy and weak. Leaning forward I rested my hands on my knees, sucking in as much air through my nose as I could to remain standing.

“The contrast between the white hall and the multitude of colours in this room can best be described as an assault on the senses, can’t they Gavin? I must apologise for not warning you at the door, but you had me off guard with your visual full nelson. I’ll see if he is ready to see you now.” said the amazon as she retreated.

I did my best to control my breathing by taking steady shallow breaths as Miss Bell walked off through a door on the right of me.

My eyes were focused on the forest green carpet lying beneath my dirty special edition Batman Converse sneakers when Faisal’s black leather shoes came to rest directly in front of them. I tried to think of something clever to say about what I could only imagine were very expensive Italian loafers but all I could manage was to look up into his gigantic face and wince.

“Don’t let Miss Pudding Boobs out there fool you. She’s very good at what she does and what she does is protect and serve Dr. J. And Dr. J is a very important person in these parts, the top of the fucking food chain as far as you’re concerned. Understand me, Sargent Blue Eyes?” The gorilla glowered at me gloriously.

Finding it hard to focus on the big man’s face and remain standing on my own two feet, I plopped onto my ass on the neon green zebra patterned carpet beneath my feet.

Faisal circled like a tiger taunting a prey that had absolutely no chance in hell of escaping his grasp. “What you’re experiencing now is just a fraction of what we do here, Gavin. And we do it very well. Imagine being able to bring a man to his knees, well ass in your case, using nothing but colour patterns and said man’s own libido; the sounds that float into his ears on the very air he breaths into his lungs.”

Faisal stopped directly in front of me and I struggled to remain sitting up. I saw my short, pathetically boring life flash before my eyes which had me ending up torn into tiny little chunks being fed to the big man’s fish.

The room became a tornado of swirling tangling colours around me as Faisal teetered and towered directly over my body. My mind exploded in a symphony of firing synapses as it did its

best to focus on the big man's face. My brain hardly managed to create what could best be described as a blurry foto; as my mouth muttered and betrayed what my mind tried unapologetically to conceal. "Funny not found, Coyote Devil. Crazy does it, mistook mistake!" I screamed.

The face hovering over me twisted in Piccasoian style, my struggling brain turning Faisal into a life size bobble head right in front of my eyes. I knew I didn't have long to remain sitting upright. His lips twisted into a licorice smile while teeth like chicklets danced around a cobra tongue.

"What a mouthy mess you've become! I have to say I'm impressed though. Most don't manage to stay conscious this long. I usually have to drag their ass out of the elevator. Just let yourself go, man. When you wake up, you'll be in Oz with the wizard." The gorilla was melting now and quite frankly, so was I.

A shroud fluttered momentarily filling my mind with dancing baby blue bullets on pillows of tanned brown turkeys. A sweet forbidden scent filled my head and I was floating in a sea of blue haired secretary's sawing away at nails of concrete pillars.

I tried to lift my head but the flicker of lights piercing my eyes every few seconds made my stomach wrench. I could only give in to whatever forces were working their magic spell on my body and mind, letting myself succumb to the blackness that beckoned from deep inside this Pseudo faux me. Allowing the light to fade out, I hoped I would wake up again soon.

Waking to the sound of a familiar woman's voice I immediately calmed my mind and body as they taught us to do in hostage training. I made sure not to open my eyes and relaxed my body even though every signal my brain sent out was to pounce up and look around. I controlled my breathing while listening to the words being spoken in the room around me. So far there was just the woman, the one who introduced herself as Miss Bell.

Her voice was what cotton candy would sound like if you were to set it on fire. I did my best not to think about the delicious way she filled out her pant suit in all the right places and focused on the fact that she had a main hand in the position I was in at the moment. "Is isopod three ready yet? Excellent, he may be bringing a new trainee over shortly. Thank you."

I heard the beeping of a cell phone and the familiar clacking of those stiletto shoes walking away from me and wondered if I was the new trainee she was speaking of. The fact that

I was here today on a job interview was the furthest thing from my mind, but I became extremely excited at the possibility that I might actually have a job and debated opening my eyes to get this freak show on the move.

“Sass no frass, authorization Bell.” Came her voice again, this time cotton candy melting. The sound of a large bolt unlocking hit my eardrums followed by a door opening and closing with the faint sound of black leather stiletto fading off in the distance behind it.

Concentrating as best I could on what I heard, I surveyed the room from wherever it was I lay. Behind me there was a light crackling sound, to the right of me the soft ruffle of pages being flipped through and in front of me to the right of where Miss Bell had left was the familiar sound of a bubbling fish tank.

“I find it hard to focus on the most remedial of tasks. It is the sound the world makes around me that creates the biggest hurdle. While I am aware that every sense that is stimulated and hammered upon affect the manner in which we react to things and how we function in everyday life, it is the sounds that beat me down the most. I quite often prefer my own company and have spent many a night getting lost in my own memories and thoughts.”

I didn't recognize this new voice at all, and I was very good with voices. It came from the direction of ruffling papers and the words it spoke were my own, having written them to a man I thought was mentally lost to the world in a veteran's hospital many months ago because I had promised him I would drop him a line.

I decided to sit up, dropping the sleeping beauty routine. These people were obviously five steps ahead of me and controlling the game, so I figured I might as well let it take me on whatever course it was going.

I opened my eyes to a room that was much more inviting than the last one I had been in. There was a fire crackling gently in a gas fireplace to the right of me. To my left was a fish tank not quite as impressive as Faisal's was, but the fish did their best to appear just as dangerous. The colours in this room were warm and inviting and I couldn't be sure but I could swear there was a hint of bacon cooking in the air.

Directly in front of me, in the matching leather chair to the sofa I was seated on, was a man who I was almost completely sure I had never laid eyes on before in my life even though he seemed vaguely familiar.

He had a thick file folder on his knees. He lifted it up and placed it on the small table beside him and picked up a saucer. He didn't stick his pinky out when he sipped from it, but he still had the air of someone who felt they were superior to others, whether or not it was because he was a tea drinker wasn't yet apparent to me. I have always been suspicious of people who drink anything from a porcelain cup.

He was a large man of average height. He sat with a slight hunch so maybe he was taller than average, but there was no mistaking the fact that he probably never missed a snack in between three hot meals a day. He was clean shaven; or rather he had probably been for the majority of the day. A dark five o'clock shadow poked its way out of the two bottom most of his four chins. I put him to be around the age of sixty even though his hair had yet to show even one grey strand, but I didn't rule out the possibility that he was the type to dye their greys away. It was somewhat long for a man of his age and he had slicked it back with a lubricant of some sort but it was beginning to wear off as several tiny visible strands sticking up in rebellious unison.

"I am J. Uddy. You may call me Mr. Uddy. Eventually, like everyone else here, you may end up calling me Dr. J. Did you write the words I spoke just now, Gavin?"

The faint sound of Miss Bells heels thundered towards us from the other side of the door next to the fish tank and I actually pondered my odds on bolting for the door and intercepting her as she entered the room. She was probably still covered in whatever sweet smelling knock out gas they had used before, not to mention I wasn't quite sure if I could handle a gal of her demeanor mano a mano anyhow.

"You already know I did, Mr. Uddy." I decided to play it cool; not knowing where I was or how many armed guards might be waiting for me on the other side of the door. Besides, I was very curious to see where this was headed. I had nothing to lose and a job to gain. In this day and age, what else does a man have? Love, maybe? I wasn't the romantic type and had given up on love not too long after Kindergarten.

Mr. Uddy smiled as Miss Bell opened the door. She entered with a pitcher of water, grabbing a glass from the table in front of me and pouring, her black leather covered toe tapping impatiently on the wooden floor. Her tanned and toned calves flexing out the side of her leg with every tap.

I took the glass graciously from her, stroking her finger gently as I did. I ignored the urge to grab her and use her as a hostage to free myself from this loony bin. Her skin was soft as a

newborn kittens, but I could feel the muscle flexing underneath. Her smile told me I wouldn't even make it to door of this room, let alone anywhere near outside. I thanked her and took a sip of the water.

“I have always been fascinated with the human mind, Gavin. Ever since I was a little boy I have been amazed by what we as humans can endure. We are inundated with a constant barrage of stimulus; what we see and hear, what we smell and taste, all of these things are studied and recorded by the human brain. Some of these things get an immediate reaction and others are simply locked away in the back of our skull never to be dealt with again. Do you agree that as a species humans have yet to unlock even half of what the human brain is capable of? It is something I always contemplate.”

I hadn't noticed it immediately but Mr. Uddy had a slight accent that I couldn't quite place and it sounded like he said cuntemplate instead of contemplate. I bit my tongue not to laugh out loud.

Miss Bell stood directly behind him now in a secret service stance trying to convince me she was controlling the room and I just about lost all interest in her sexually. I had actually lost interest in any answers to most of the questions flowing through my head as I became slowly aware that whatever drugs they had pumped into me were finally leaving my system.

I thought about the last two years of not working and getting past my injury and not being able to find a post and be the soldier that I wanted to be and decided to commit myself to whatever snake oil these people were selling for the time being. I had nothing else to lose. Besides, I was tired and beaten down and just wanted to be a part of something again. They obviously had some clout behind them and any organisation that Hannah was willing to get behind couldn't be altogether that bad, could it?

“Are you guy's a military or government operation?” Miss Bell didn't flinch a muscle, but I could tell she didn't like the question, or maybe she simply didn't like me questioning her boss.

Mr. Uddy brought both his hands up to his mouth as if he were about to pray and smiled. “We are neither, and we are both. I work with the hope of satisfying my own personal quest in probing the depths of the human mind and they employ me because I am the best at what I do. You were recommended to us by a current employee and we acquired your folder through

military channels. You came highly recommended. A Captain Burnout, if I remember correctly?”

“Cap.” Mr. Uddy had remembered correctly. Cap as I had called him. Captain Burnout to everyone else doing a stint in the VA Medical Center in Hampton. PTSD didn’t cut it for Cap. Permanently fucked was more likely what they had stamped on his file. He held on to the deaths of the men under his command like a Romany girl held onto her virginity. But I had liked Cap for some strange reason and he had taken a bit of a shine to me while I was staying there. I wondered what his connection to this operation was, but knew better than to ask.

“So, what exactly is it you do and what could you possibly want with a peg legged wanna be writer?” I expected nothing but evasive answers for the time being.

I had done enough in the covert end of the world to know that most of the time you only ever got half-truths and clever exaggerations, but in any job interview it’s always important to ask at least a few pertinent questions. Miss Bell shifted slightly in her thigh high leather boots and I knew my tone had struck a nerve. Her obvious dislike for sarcasm screamed from those bright green eyes.

“We are in the business of obtaining information in a time when the means in which we use to obtain said information is under constant scrutiny. The powers that be want, no need, answers but they want to obtain them with less intrusive methods. Our... unit is at the top of the field in such methods.”

The pride Mr. Uddy had in whatever work he and his unit had been doing here beamed off of him like a pyrotechnic show at a Metallica concert and I lost my cool for a moment. “Ha! Spare the rod to spoil the torture victim?! You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

In an effort to show she wasn’t willing to put up with any back talk from me to her high and mighty leader, Miss Bell put on her best tough guy face and took one step forward towards me. “I don’t think I like you’re attitude.”

“Lucky for me I’m not selling it, then.” I didn’t move a muscle outside of my mouth and my tongue when saying this.

I didn’t even look at her, just stared at Mr. Uddy to let him know I wasn’t someone to fuck with any more. Their psychedelic perfume had worn off and she stepped back without having to be told. Any question I had as to whether or not I could take Miss Tinkerbell if we ever ended up in a dark alley had just been laid to rest and I was beginning to feel like my old

able bodied self again. It was exhilarating and Mr. Uddy knew it, smiling a massive Cheshire grin as though he had reached in and plucked the shrapnel out of my foot himself.

When he stood his hunch immediately disappeared and I corrected his height for around six foot tall. He walked with a slight limp over to a mini bar next to the fish tank.

He carefully poured himself a drink as I resisted the urge to ask what was with these people and all their fish. He took a long hard swig of dark amber liquid then stared into the oversized fishbowl in front of him. “Aaah. Bourbon me likey. Are you a drinking man, Gavin? I never trust a man who doesn’t admit to a vice. It simply means he has one he doesn’t want anyone else to know about.”

“Wouldn’t that be something that’s beneficial to us? Something we can use against the person?” I took out some cigarettes, popping the soft pack towards my mouth. I sucked the filter tip into my mouth and between my teeth with a smile. Glancing down at an ashtray filled with cigarette butts I flicked the top of my military issued zippo across my knee, struck the flint with the tiny metal wheel and sucked in deeply. The hot burn of the cigarettes chemical cornucopia lassoed my epiglottis, bungee jumping down the back of my throat, into my lungs and back out again.

Mr. Uddy smiled as though he had more respect for me now that he knew I had a vice. He poured some bourbon in another glass and limped it over holding it out to me. Looking deep into my eyes I knew he meant that if I took the glass, I was taking the job. I reached out and took it gladly. “Enjoy your drink. Have another smoke. I will have Hannah come and give you a quick tour while I prepare a little demonstration of what it is we do here.”

To say that Hannah was thrilled to death we would be working under the same roof again would have won the gold medal at the Olympics of Understatements. She bounced off the walls leading away from Mr. Uddy’s office like a super ball on speed as we briskly walked by rooms while she blurted out a brief description of what happened behind each closed door. Suffice it to say there were several rooms she couldn’t account for. She never said if it was because she didn’t know or couldn’t remember.

We took a different elevator several floors up to a giant laboratory where dozens of people worked diligently at various scientific machines. As I started to become nervous that they

would expect me to learn these machines as part of my job I happened upon a familiar face in the lab. “Is that Cool Jesse over there?”

Hannah smiled and kept up her pace as she led me out of the lab area and towards another elevator that was rather heavily guarded. “It was. The Space Wad is around here somewhere too.”

Hannah turned and stopped as we arrived at the guard station just in front of the elevator. She handed the guard who was seated a pass card that had hung around her neck and placed her hand on a scanning plate that immediately lit up green. “We’ll get you set up in the system as soon as you start next week and you won’t need anyone to babysit ya while you’re in the building.”

The elevator doors closed after Hannah swiped a card on a wall panel in front of her. She began to type in a sequence of numbers and I felt a little more at ease thinking about how many people I already knew here. Good people, albeit a little stranger than most folk, but then I never really enjoyed the company of normal humans anyhow. Cool Jesse had gone through basic training with Hannah and The Space Wad and I had worked a couple of missions together before that. Last I had heard The Wad had assaulted a superior officer, but dishonourably discharging someone with The Space Wads connections and background wouldn’t be the easiest of tasks, so it was possible he might still be enrolled.

The elevator doors opened to a massive room that looked like it spanned the entire floor without even so much as one wall. It was filled with computer servers stacked from floor almost to ceiling, side by side. They looked like giant dominoes lit up with Christmas lights. Hannah led me through the room and I tried to count the rows on either side of me but lost count at forty amidst the flashing lights and escalating sound of what I could swear was a tap dancer dancing. We arrived at the center of the room and the tap dancer was revealed. It was filled with people at computer terminals clacking away at keyboards.

“This is where you will be doing the majority of your work for the meantime, Gavin. Eventually I hope you will move on to other projects.” Mr. Uddy walked up to me and placed one firm hand on my shoulder while lifting the other up in the air towards the computer terminals and led me along the first row. “Compared to what most people like to call the real world, the internet is a very open territory as far as rights and legalities go. Most people join a site or

download programs clicking “I Agree” without ever even reading the pages of information and legal jargon that has been presented to them.” I tried to get a feel for what it was these people were doing exactly at these computers. Most of them seemed to have a similar program open on the screens in front of them and they were all typing furiously on keyboards or reading something from the screens to themselves. Several workers had notebooks on the desks beside them.

I decided it was time to be a little blunt. “So we’re spying on people? Cell phones? Internet? Illegal wire taps?”

“On the contrary, Gavin, nothing that is done in this building is of an illegal nature. The laboratory you walked through earlier contains every day household items and chemicals that any housewife can buy online with a credit card. As for everyone in this room, they are online communicating with people who willingly talk to them through their computers. Every room in this building has a different purpose going on behind its doors. You were the victim of what it is we do on the upper floors here earlier; a necessary demonstration I put all our new recruits through. It gives them a feel for what our hard work can produce.”

Mr. Uddy stopped in front of a young man who was reading from a notebook and placed a hand on his shoulder. The man turned looking up at me and something that I noticed but hadn’t quite clicked on when we first walked into this room became very clear to me now. The left side of the man’s face was horribly scarred with what looked like third degree burns and he was missing an arm below the elbow. I turned to look at some of the other workers in the row behind us. The woman next to us was missing a hand. The man next to her was in a wheelchair. It seemed like everyone in this room was injured somehow.

“Most of them are like us, Gavin.” Faisal Adams swooped towards us like a Raven approaching a discarded bag of fries. His smile this time seemed genuine and kind, as though we had been friends from childbirth and were being reunited after years of not seeing each other. As he smiled he looked down lifting his left pant leg to reveal a titanium artificial limb underneath. I was quite surprised. If he hadn’t of shown me, I never would have known.

“There are different levels of handicap, and of course some are mentally impaired, but I think you’re getting the gist of how things work here.” Faisal came to a stop beside Mr. Uddy, both of them smiling at me.

I concentrated deep down into my gut wriggling around to make sure it was awake. My instincts had gotten me through countless tough situations and the few times in my life when I had gotten screwed is when I didn't listen to my gut, but today it was telling me nothing. I got the feeling that everything I had been told or seen with my own eyes so far was on the up and up or at the very least that this place was somewhere I could finally get comfortable and make a name for myself. Maybe even make a difference in the world. "Give me the rundown of what's done in this section."

Mr. Uddy shifted into overdrive. He did his best not to bore me with technical details as I wasn't the most computer literate fella around. He explained how some computer geeks had made up a web page that anyone in the world with an internet connection could use. It enabled any user with a computer the ability to send and read text based messages. Anyone could log in and make up their own account and talk to anyone, anywhere in the world.

"We run the site. Every piece of information the people send out is catalogued and assimilated through the computers on either side of us. Right now there are one hundred people working to go through all of this data that the computers catalogue into different categories and another hundred who are pretending to be someone they are not on the web site itself. They reach out and communicate with any accounts that have been red flagged, do their best to develop a relationship with said account and assess what level of danger they are to the world at large, at the same time collecting personally identifiable information about the users and sharing it with third party groups who fund this organization. Right now we have an active user count of around a hundred thousand and we expect this number to grow exponentially in the next three years to almost one million by 2010. At our meeting this morning, the IT geeks told me they are working on a way to use the program in cell phones! Can you believe that? You are joining us at a very exciting time."

It was all starting to come together for me now. Why they would want someone with writing skills and a good imagination, someone who they knew they could trust with a solid military background.

The assignment Mr. Uddy had given to Hannah to give to me at her apartment; creating a character, with a background and personality that lived and breathed. I was to become a new millennium spy. We were spying on our own people, half for national security reasons and half to secure funding to run this international spy ring.

I wondered what fast food burger conglomerate made the biggest contributions to our cause and just how much power this operation wielded. “This isn’t exactly the kind of operation I’ve been trained for.”

“Everybody’s gotta start somewhere, Slick. You show us what you can do in this division and we’ll find some more interesting work for you to do down the line.” Faisal patted me on the back and disappeared into the computer monoliths.

I glanced down the aisle of used to be soldiers typing away furiously at their keyboards. They looked like they were actually into their job, maybe even enjoying it. I thought about the other jobs I had interviewed for in the past month and the possibility of having to get back out there again and pound the pavement for a shitty office filing job made my stomach sink a little. “When can I begin?”

Hannah gave a slight cheer and threw her arms out and hugged me. The last time she had done that was over two years ago when she found out she had cleared basic training. A few days later I’d been given new orders and shipped out, thinking I would never see her again. Maybe there was something to this Karma deal after all.

Hannah backed away sheepishly and Mr. Uddy cleared his throat and held out his right hand, smiling. “Welcome to project Twitter, Gavin.”

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