

The Admission

The most important things are the hardest things to say. They are the things you get ashamed of, because words diminish them-words shrink things that seemed limitless when they were in your head to no more than living size when they're brought out. But it's more than that, isn't it? The most important things lie too close to wherever your secret heart is buried, like landmarks to a treasure your enemies would love to steal away. And you may make revelations that cost you dearly only to have people look at you in a funny way, not understanding what you've said at all, or why you thought it was so important that you almost cried while you were saying it. That's the worst, I think. When the secret stays locked within not for want of a teller but for want of an understanding ear.

--Stephen King, *The Body*

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Hey. I'm Josh. I don't know what else there is to tell you about me. There isn't a damn thing special about me that you couldn't say about dozens or even thousands of other people.

Some people call me a hero because I'm a Marine.

Yeah, some hero. Take a look at my past. In a little more than four years I've lead fifteen of my friends to their graves. Some hero. What kind of person gets their friends killed and still lives with that knowledge? I mean some of these people were kids really. One of them wasn't even old enough to buy cigarettes for himself. But here he was old enough to wear the uniform of a United States Marine and to fight and die for his country.

Having to talk to someone's parents or wife definitely isn't easy. Try telling them that the person that they love so much is dead and that they'll never see them again. Try explaining that they died for a noble cause and that you'd gladly give your life to bring them back. If that doesn't bring you regrets of living on, I don't know what will.

It's not just that either. I'd been wishing I was dead for the past ten years. When I was thirteen my best friend was murdered in front of me and I held him as he died. When you're a teen growing up, friends are about all you have. I lost the best one I could ever have right at the point I needed him the most. I was at the point in life when I was starting to change.

Hitting puberty is a rough time for a lot of youth. In middle school I figured I'd be able to count on Bobby to help me out through this change and into the big world of High School. Then he was murdered. The only person I ever wanted around me was gone. And you wonder why I've wanted to die ever since?

Bobby and I were the kind of friends who connected automatically and just always seemed to know everything that was going on in each other's lives without having to say anything. We always loved to do things together, even some of which were considered different. You'll understand what I mean in a minute.

Now whenever I see blonde hair on someone, I can't help but think of him. Now, blonde girls are about all I'll go out with, partly because they make me think of him and the good close friendship we had. The same thing with his blue eyes. They seemed to just be able to see right through me.

I had been over at his place for the Thanksgiving weekend. As much as it's supposed to be a family holiday, I really didn't want to spend it with my family. I really couldn't stand my parents, but then again what teen can? So there I was over at his house, just hanging out with my best friend, who in reality was pretty much my brother. That's the way we thought of each other and that's the kind of love we shared for each other.

Anyways there we were. We ate a pretty good Thanksgiving lunch, but with just Bobby's parents and us being there, we didn't overindulge like a lot of people do. It was just a good sized meal. A couple of hours later, Bobby's parents were leaving for an office party at his Dad's work.

Bobby's Dad, I should tell you for this next part of the story, worked at a food distributor. They sold stuff to both grocery stores and some pretty nice restaurants. He got paid pretty well too. That's how he was able to afford this nice new lakefront house in a subdivision that was still under construction.

When his Mom was out in the car, Bobby's Dad pulled us aside out front.

"I want you two to listen and listen good," he'd told us. "I know that when the cat's away, the mice will play and boys will be boys."

We both knew he was cool with some of the trouble we'd gotten in the past. He hadn't even really ever yelled at us for some of the bigger trouble we'd made. With the tone in his voice now, we knew he was going to play out something cool for us.

"And I know how sometimes when boys will be boys they've been known to start food fights. But then again, you two have never gone and done that, have you?"

"No," we both had answered honestly.

"But a good quality food fight is a part of growing up," he said as he directed our attention to a pair of good sized delivery vans parked back to back across the street. "Now boys, inside those trucks there is something I know you'll both be able to put to good use. There's a bunch of pies in a cooler, whipped cream, five gallon buckets of chocolate syrup and a few dozen eggs. I even pulled some strings and got you two nice big buckets of Nickelodeon's green slime. Everything you two need to have a really good food fight. Don't worry about messing up the inside of the trucks, I've got it worked out to clean them. I know you're both wondering why that would take two trucks and I'll tell you it doesn't. That's just what's in one of them. In the other is another good gift for you. It's a ten foot wide pumpkin pie, topped with whipped cream. I figured instead of just a pie to the face, you two might like a pie to your whole body. We won't be home until late, so you two enjoy yourselves."

We assured him that we would. We were two thirteen year old kids who had just been given a bunch of messy stuff and told to obliterate each other with it. How could we not enjoy ourselves? No sooner than they were heading down the street of their empty neighborhood, we were climbing in through the cab of one of the trucks. The back doors were both open, creating one very large truck bay. Fortunately it was fairly cool in there, otherwise it would have been one sweaty food fight.

We were both in awe of how much we really had. The math worked out to at least two dozen pies each, maybe a little more. There were chocolate and strawberry cream pies along with the Thanksgiving traditional pumpkin. Looking in another little cooler there was three dozen eggs for each of us along with a dozen cans of whipped cream each. Sitting next to those coolers was three five gallon buckets of chocolate syrup for both of us along with a thirty gallon bucket of green slime

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each. The slime buckets were each up on a stand with wheels we could kneel under to get slimed. A lever opened the spout for the slop to ooze through.

When we stepped over into the other truck bay we were truly in awe. As promised, it was a ten foot wide pumpkin pie that was about two feet deep. Freshly applied whipped cream topped it another two feet and there was a step stool beside it which we could jump from to face plant into this magnificent pie. There was even a red balloon filled with whipped cream on top of the pie, taking place of the cherry. Bobby was the first to break the silence.

“Strip,” he said. “We’re doing this in boxers.”

I thought it was a good choice. What would have been the point of messing up our clothes? The fun of a food fight is getting yourself messy, feeling the mess on your skin. In boxers we’d have more skin for more mess. Once we had shed the appropriate clothes, we topped the pumpkin pies with a liberal amount of whipped cream. With plenty left in the coolers, he handed me two cartons of eggs before taking the same for him.

“Alright, here’s the game,” he said. “We stand on either side of the truck with our back against the wall. Then we chuck eggs at each other trying to hit each other in this order: face, left nipple, right nipple, belly button, groin. The egg has to crack for it to count. The first time you miss, you take a pie to the face. The second time is a pie down the shorts and the third time you get slimed with chocolate syrup. We’ll trade off throwing at each other. When you start again, you just pick up where you left off. The first one with all the spots dirty loses and gets slimed with the green slime. If either of us make it all the way through and hit all the spots one time through, the loser has to dive into the pie naked. How’s that sound?”

“Good,” I told him. I just hoped I didn’t have to flop naked into the pie. I wasn’t ugly, but I sure as hell wasn’t as confident about my body as he was. He really was good looking and he knew it.

Since it was his idea I let him start out. He got my face and both nipples before he missed my belly button. His throw was a couple inches high and cracked on my abs. I smacked him with a pie and made sure to rub it in really well. No sooner had he cleared the strawberry cream from his eyes did he get pelted with an egg to the forehead. I got both nipples and his belly button before he really knew it.

“Strip, Bobby,” I said with complete self assurance. “You’re about to take a nude pie bath.”

Now some people would say being that cocky would be a sure jinx. However, when Bobby dropped his boxers, I nailed him square in the balls with an egg that cracked and shed it’s slimy contents on him. He dropped to his knees.

“No,” he cried. Since he wasn’t holding himself, I couldn’t tell if it was pain, or from the sudden realization that he would have to partake in the punishment he had meant for me. As he sobbed silently to himself in utter defeat for a couple seconds, I pushed the slime tank so it was above his head.

He didn’t hear it and just kept his eyes closed and his head tilted back.

“Now what is it those kids said on that show to get slimed,” I asked Bobby.

“I don’t know,” he answered correctly. Just as if it were scripted on the show, he got slimed for saying the line. Watching thirty gallons go over his head was perfect. Truth be told, watching it on the show it had always seemed pretty damn gross. I had said that if it had happened to me I would have been truly disgusted. Now, seeing it in person, I thought it was actually kinda cool. I knew that’s what I had to convince myself since I would be getting slimed soon.

When it finally stopped oozing over his head, there was a pretty thick puddle of it on the floor all around him. On his front everything was covered from his head down. Most of the back of his torso was covered, as was part of his butt. He only had splotches on his legs. When he opened his eyes, I was already below my tank of slime waiting for him to get me back. He was pretty quick to do it too.

We spent a great deal of time then smacking each other with pies. It made me a little uncomfortable that he didn’t put his shorts back on, and even worse when he wanted me to pie him in that region. I did it though out of friendship and I tolerated it the whole time.

We took a couple minutes to towel off the cream and slime before we went on and used the rest of the eggs and the rest of the whipped cream. We both looked really strange covered in white and yellow streaks of slop.

“I bet you couldn’t stick your tongue into the chocolate without getting your face dirty,” he told me. I couldn’t let him talk shit like that. I knelt in front of one and stuck out my tongue. Just before it touched, his hand pushed my whole head into the syrup. I kinda freaked and pulled my head back out. Fortunately he didn’t hold me down, or else I’d have been choking on chocolate. He picked up the bucket and dumped it over my head as I was regaining my breath. Another one promptly followed before he finally picked one up and slimed himself with it.

“Hey Josh,” he said. “Slime me again.”

He pushed a chocolate bucket to me and I stood and granted his wish. After that we both launched the last buckets at each other. When we went to set the buckets down, we found ourselves slipping around with sixty gallons of slime and thirty gallons of chocolate syrup at our feet. Not to mention all the cream from the pies. All the slop on the floor was pretty damn close to being ankle deep. If there had been one more tank of green slime it would have been.

I was surprised again when I was grabbed from behind and taken down into the slop. Bobby had succeeded in his goal though, when we promptly began wrestling in the mess. Before either of us could get a pin I stopped him in an advance.

“Hey, Bobby, don’t you think you should slam yourself into that pie now?”

“Yeah,” he said. “And thankfully, I’m already naked.”

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Walking over to the giant pie, he looked like some sludge creature from a science fiction movie. He got to the top of the step stool and jumped in. To continue the fight he started, I body slammed him, hitting him as hard as I could. After all too long, I was finally able to pin him. It was just a little difficult when the stuff you're wrestling in is almost as tall as you are standing up. We left the truck after he put his shorts back on and hosed each other off on the side of his house.

Now you're probably wondering why I went to such detail to tell you all of that, right? What kind of sick perv would want to think about two kids obliterating each other with messy shit while one of them is in boxers and the other's naked, right? It was a big event for the two of us. It was two friends being friends, kids being kids. But does it have anything to do with anything else? Well, trust me, we'll get there.

The afternoon wound on and we just pretty much chilled out and talked. We didn't really talk about anything in particular, just mainly enjoyed the company of our best friend. A couple of times we went back over to the trucks and wrestled in the pie again. We really didn't want to let such a good thing go to just one use.

Bobby's parents had come home about ten thirty that night. About a half hour later, when they were all nice and tucked into bed, Bobby and I were still up and talking when we heard a crash come from the family room. Bobby and I both thought that it was probably the cat knocking something over. Bobby said he'd check it out and left the door open on his way out. I wasn't too far behind him and saw a shocking sight when I rounded the corner.

Bobby had a look of shock on his face, and I soon saw why, as a burglar appeared and thrust a knife into Bobby's chest. He removed the knife and made a break for the door to get the hell out of there before he saw me. I cleared the distance between my dear friend and me just as he dropped to his knees. He wasn't really crying like you'd expect, but tears were coming from his eyes. I yelled for his parents and fortunately I heard them coming.

They saw what had happened and Bobby's dad was quick to call 911. His mom knelt beside us and wept. I wouldn't let go of him as I felt the life and strength draining from him. I didn't care that he was bleeding all over my chest from his. It was one of those moments that you knew you only had so much time left. I needed to hold the friend that was really the brother I'd never had. He moved his head by mine and whispered in my ear.

"You'll always be my brother," he said quietly. It was then that the last bit of his life slipped from within him.

I'd held my best friend the whole time until the paramedics got there about ten minutes later. Apparently the paramedics had to pry him from my arms before they took him away and the police questioned me. I had to take their word for it. Even to this day ten years later I remember nothing between when he died and his funeral. I just remember him dying then being there at his funeral. In the counseling I had to get after that, they called it post traumatic stress syndrome. All I knew was that I had lost my best friend.

Of all the things we did together, I knew right then I would remember our wrestling matches. Afterwards, no matter who won, we would hold each other in a brotherly embrace. It had always comforted me to get a hug from him.

That next August after he died I started High School. I had found a couple people that had helped me through bits and pieces of it. Nothing really that ever made it for too long. I guess I had my standards set too high. After all, Bobby would have done anything for me and pretty much had. None of these people would have because we didn't have the long lasting relationships.

My sophomore year I'd made up my mind I was going to slit my wrist. I'd made the enormously stupid mistake of writing a letter to my friend about it. Yeah, you can see where this one went. Naturally he told a guidance counselor about it and I was sent to counseling. Some help it did. It just reiterated the fact I was going nuts and no one much cared about me.

I'd told him about it because I wanted his help, not some damn shrink. Did he help me? As little as he could get away with. He'd give me a hug every once and a while and tell me how much he cared about me. When he'd hug me I'd think about Bobby. I might have been hugging Matt, but I'd keep thinking it was Bobby in my arms.

Then that summer after Matt had reported my intentions, we got in a little fight and, well we weren't friends anymore. After all what did I matter to him then? He had graduated high school and he was going out into the 'real' world.

I made it through the rest of high school without him, although just barely. How I managed to pass all my classes was a minor miracle. I tried to do college for a semester but I was sick of school. After twelve straight years, enough was enough. At least my grades had improved in college. It's amazing what happens when you get into subjects you're interested in. The massive course load I was taking in both psychology and marketing didn't help.

I worked as an Assistant Manager for a while at a Radio Shack. Whoopee. That's something that will get you far in life. The Manager was one of those who rarely showed up at the store. Thinking back at it now, he showed up as little as he could get away with it. There were only four employees that worked there. If the manager and I were both scheduled to open, I knew it would only be me. He would always have another one of the key holders scheduled for when he was supposed to be working. That way he could spend just a little time to say he was there and then leave. At least working there gave me time to think of what I wanted to do with my life.

That's when I decided to join the Marine Corps. It presented a good chance for me to go out and see the world. More so I hoped something would happen where some little shit hole, third world country would get in some kind of trouble and then come begging us to help. Then once we helped them, they'd turn their backs on us just like all the rest of the bastards we'd helped in the past. Like France. Sure they helped us in the early years of our country. But how many times do we have to free those bastards from everyone that they surrender to before they realize we're helping their dumb asses out?

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World War One and Two come to mind, where they spit on our servicemen after we liberated them. Yeah, you're welcome. Assholes.

Any which way, I was hoping I'd get sent over somewhere where there was some kind of 'police action' going. Then someone might do me the favor of killing me, seeing as I still haven't been able to kill myself. Something told me though that I really wouldn't be that lucky.

So I enlisted in May of '99 and got through all of the basic training and job schooling in mid 2000. Naturally I had signed up to become a field radio operator. Remember, I said I worked at Radio Shack, so I've got the tech background for it. But that's not entirely why I chose that job.

The life expectancy in combat is only six seconds.

You may not really know about field radio operators, but I'm sure you've seen 'em in some war movie. Yeah, you've seen the guy with the antenna sticking off of his back? Yeah, that's me. I'm the unfortunate bastard the enemy shoots at because I'm the one that would call in for support. If the enemy was smart and had good aim, they would shoot at the radio and render it into scrap metal. Any other idiot out there could pick up the damn thing and radio for support. Fortunately for me, our enemies aren't that smart and their aim isn't that good.

Plus when I was working at Radio Shack and a couple of radio stations, I'd picked up a lot of great knowledge of that sort of thing. I'd even been able to get a ham radio license. Being able to talk to people I didn't know on the radio kept things pretty interesting. At least they didn't know the nutcase I really was. I also liked how just about any time of day I could find someone to talk to. It's not always that easy to just start up a conversation. Things have to be just right and sometimes it seems like you have to be standing on your head facing north on the equinox to make a contact.

After a little bit of time, actually about the time I finished my job school and reported to my unit, I figured out that we weren't at war with anyone. This meant my chances of getting deployed to some stupid police action were somewhere between slim and closer to none. If I couldn't go out there in some hostile situation I couldn't get killed as easy.

Obviously my plan needed some revision.

That's when I decided I was going to go recon. It's basically the Marine Corps version of Special Forces. It's not like the SEALs that go out on all these missions that are so classified people won't be able to read about them for about fifty years. It definitely isn't like those damn Boy Scouts that call themselves Army Rangers. The only damn difference between the Boy Scouts and the Army is heavy artillery.

From all I've seen, the damn Boy Scouts are more disciplined and could probably get the job done better.

Marine Recon are the ones that go out there and scout things out and give their best opinion as to what needs to be blown up first. This is a threat, that isn't. That's the basic deal of it without too much sugar coating. Now some people that may hear my story that were recon will try to say there was a lot more to this. Hey, come on, it's mainly sneak and peak.

I hoped that if I went out there in some recon mission, maybe something at some point would go sour. Then there may be, just maybe, the chance of some shots being exchanged and I'd take one or two of them. In the worst case scenario, I wouldn't be dead, just seriously injured. But at least I was doing something about it. I could at least go out there and repeat the process until I got it right. Then I'd be dead and no one would realize what a pussy I am.

I'm a tough guy and I can kick the living shit out of a lot of people. I've even taken on a Delta Force and two Army Rangers at the same time. Managed to send all three of them to the hospital. And you wonder why I talk shit about them? So yes, I am a tough guy. I mean, come on, I was a black belt in Taekwondo before I enlisted. Add in the training I've had to do in the Corps, and yeah, I know a couple things about kicking someone's ass. But then again I'm a pussy too because I can't even do enough harm to myself to wind up dead. I have to get someone to do it for me. Too bad Dr. Kevorkian only deals with really old and really sick people. Terminally ill shouldn't be the only qualification for sympathetic suicides.

Try mental torment sometime. See how that grows on you Jack.

So was seeing my best friend murdered at the age of thirteen and holding him as he died traumatic enough for me to want to die ten years later? Partially, yeah. But just stick with me here and you'll find out more.

With my recon training done, plus getting my ass thoroughly kicked all throughout SERE school, I reported to Second Recon Battalion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina. Checking in as a still pretty young Lance Corporal, I met up with another Marine who was just checking in as well. Lance Corporal Miles Brown had just graduated Scout Sniper training and, as we found out, we would both be joining Recon Platoon.

I think it was a break for both of us to be able to check in together. Most people go into a unit not knowing anyone. At least we knew each other, which was a good enough start for us. Throughout the checking in process, we got to know each other quite well and oddly enough got put into the same barracks room. I had been a mental mess for a while, and it was almost a relief to be sharing a room with someone I was starting to connect with.

It took the both of us two days to get fully checked in. At the end of that Tuesday, we checked in with our Platoon Sergeant, Gunny Price. He seemed like a pretty down to earth leader. It told me right off that he'd been around somewhere long enough to have been in the thick of things more than once. I thought I had found my place in the world.

"Now look, you two," he'd told us in his best hard ass voice, "you're replacing two damn fine Marines from second squad who just got out when their contract ran up. They were both damn good at their jobs and knew their shit. I won't accept anything less than the best. With that in mind, just remember that I'm fair and in fairness, I'll give you the time to

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adjust into this lifestyle. Just don't take too damn long at doing it. You're squad leader is Sergeant Dennis. He's a pretty tough son of a gun, but he'll take care of you. Any questions?"

"No, Gunny," we both answered.

"Then be here at 0715 tomorrow morning. Our morning formation is at 0730 and you two understand the whole fifteen minutes prior thing, I'm sure. If you don't, you will soon. Good day."

"Good afternoon, Gunny," we both said leaving his office.

Settling back into our room for the evening, neither one of us really had anything in mind for that night except for grabbing something to eat at the chow hall. It was an old standby to see how long it took for some of that food to actually digest through your system.

"So, Josh," Miles said after I had come out of the shower. "You ready for our new life?"

"Yeah," I'd answered honestly. "Ready as I'll ever be, I guess. I mean, hell, we don't really even know what we're in for yet. That's the thing that kinda gets me right now. It's just the fear of the unknown."

"I get that every once in a while too. I try not to worry about it though."

"I like the way you think, Miles. I guess I'm gonna have to learn the lesson from my redneck roommate."

"Well, if I'm wearing off on you already, we've got problems. I don't think this world needs anyone else like me running around out here."

"Maybe, maybe not. Well, I'm gonna jump in the shower unless you want to go first."

"Nah, Josh. You can go right ahead."

I got in the shower to help wash away the day. It had always helped me to let some hot water run over me at the end of the day. I had always been one of those people that kept work and home as separate as humanly possible. Taking a nice hot shower had been an aide to wear away the stress that might have come up in my day. While Miles and I were going to be both working and living together, we would have to see both lives of each other. I just hoped we could both keep those separate lives truly split.

Emerging from the steam of my relaxation method, Miles was pretty quick to enter the head. That would be what the military calls the bathroom, for those of you who don't know. I took my time getting dressed, knowing Miles would want to go get some dinner with me when he was done. I was kicking a foot up on to the frame of my rack, or bed if you prefer, to put my shoes on when Miles came back out. Just as I had finished tying on the second shoe, there was a firm knock on the door.

I opened the door to find yet another new face entering my life. Upon introductions, I found out that this was Sergeant Dennis, Miles and my new squad leader.

"Are you two all checked in now," he asked me.

"Yes, Sergeant," I informed him. "We had finished it all up and checked in with Gunny Price this afternoon, Sergeant."

"Good, so you two will be there all bright and early for the formation tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, Sergeant," I replied. It may sound a little repetitive, but I was trying to be respectful to the person who would be directly in charge of me. Actually, my fire team leader would be directly in charge of me, but Sergeant Dennis, my squad leader, would be in charge of him. The man before me could make my life suck if he wanted to and I didn't want him doing that.

"Are you two off to get chow now?"

"Yes, Sergeant," we both answered, Miles now fully dressed.

"Alright, come on. I want to get to know you two over dinner then."

We crossed the parking lot to the chow hall with the Sergeant asking the usual questions about who we were and where we came from. It was pretty much the standard stuff you'd ask anyone you were going to be working closely with and would need to know about.

In the cases like this, it was very helpful to know as much as you could about the people you were going to be working with. I knew that most of the little nuances of actions and attitudes would come out pretty good in training. Like I had oh so briefly mentioned, I studied psychology in college and I was good at it, so I've got a pretty good grasp on being able to read personalities. So far, the Sergeant had one I thought I was going to like. But then again, looks can be deceiving. Some things you can take at face value, others can hide details you could later wish you had known about.

Through dinner, we talked about our pasts and ourselves trying to get to know each other as best we could. It's not like there would be a multiple choice test on it in the morning, but there could very well be a different test. It's called deployment. It's a test that will truly asses you and what you can do when it counts. It's not a failing grade you have to worry about with these tests either. What would be a failing grade in a classroom means death in this lesson. It would sure help me to know this about them to help them out on down the line. Hey, I'm only in this to get myself killed. If I got one of them killed it would be totally wrong because I'm sure these two have plenty to live for.

"Alright, look," Sergeant Dennis said as we were finishing our meals. "The way I see it is this. I can be the hard ass squad leader and treat you like shit until you prove yourselves. Or I could give you the respect you deserve having proven yourselves worthy of getting this far. I figure I'll give you that, but know this. If you fuck up, I will make your life suck. Understood?"

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“Yes, Sergeant,” we both said. I figured at that point, and confirmed later on, that Miles had already been afraid that our squad leader would take the first route presented. However, and also noted seconded later on, we were both glad he was giving us the chance. My psychology training in college that I had loved so much was beginning to pay off. With what I was able to pick up, I was under the presumption that this would be a squad leader I could get along with. Unlike my last Sergeant who was a complete dick.

My last Sergeant was the kind of Marine who was only good at one thing, and that was PT. Now physical training is *part* of being a Marine. But in his mind, it was the only part. Why? Because it was the only thing he was good at. He could also handle drill, that is marching a platoon, pretty well. Otherwise he was worthless and everyone in our company realized this.

He was a motor transport mechanic, and he was the platoon sergeant for the comm shop. See something a little out of place there? What would the comm shop need with a motor t guy? The fact is, we didn't need him. The only reason he was there was because he had been kicked out of basically every other section in the company for causing some pretty serious problems in one way or another. But get him around the higher ups and he was a complete ass kisser. Can you see why no one liked him?

Fortunately the Staff Sergeant that was the next one up the chain of command was cool as hell. He was a field radio operator just like me, so you know he had a legitimate reason for being in the comm shop. He was the type that, so long as I had my work done, my radios were taken care of and my cage was secured, I could go home early.

I don't mean cage like he or Sergeant Brownie Hound kept me locked up like an animal. Due to 'National Security' our equipment had to be kept secured like that or otherwise properly guarded. Staff Sergeant Michaels and I were the only ones with keys to my cage, so I could rest assured that a certain someone else couldn't go and screw around with my stuff. Besides, he didn't know a damn thing about comm or anything I did, so I sure as hell didn't want him going near it to be able to mess up something I was working on. I also doubt he had the security clearance to see some of the workings of the programs.

For that matter, I should probably explain my job duties a little bit more to give you an idea what I was responsible for. The two main parts of communications in the Corps are computer and radio. The third, if you wanted to go that far, would be phones, but there's very few Marines who do that. It's mainly handled by civilians. For the most part, those Marines in comm are either radio or computer and for the most part not both. There are some though, like myself. We're the ones that wind up getting the better jobs when we get out because we haven't just limited ourselves to one specific area.

Combining radio and computer was a fun and interesting challenge for me. It allowed me to take my ham radio license and explore a side of it I hadn't yet done, which is data communications. This was the main part that other people weren't really supposed to see. It wasn't so much the radios or the programs or even necessarily the information that came over the radio. Granted, yeah, some of the traffic passed over the network we had set up was classified. But the whole process wasn't even really to be talked about outside of those who were the 'need to know' basis.

Any which way, I had my little cage where I could stay hidden away from this undesirable Sergeant, which kept me happy enough. Now I was facing a new Sergeant that seemed to have the capabilities of being a perfect replacement of my last one, but didn't have the desire to. From the underlying tones in his voice in how he was asking about Miles and myself, it seemed like he was genuinely interested in us.

Not that it really mattered all that much as of right now. After all, he didn't really even know us that well yet. Sure, we would be getting to know each other in the next few weeks, but his knowledge of us now was somewhat limited. I'm not saying he couldn't be reading between the lines like I was doing, but what I will admit to is that sometimes looks can be deceiving. Things aren't always what they might seem like, personalities especially.

As we walked across the parking lot the conversation continued. It was nice to see that a Sergeant, while two pay grades higher than Miles and myself, didn't try to belittle anyone, especially those he was in charge of. As we stopped in front of room 224, the room that Miles and I now lived in, Sergeant Dennis informed us that he lived next door if we needed anything. Before we separated, I asked a question I knew was on the mind of my roommate as well.

“Sergeant, what's a day in the life of our platoon usually hold?”

“First we gather up in the briefing center for our morning intel brief. That can take anywhere from thirty minutes to an hour. The brief just keeps us up to speed on what's going on in the world and what hot spots might flare up. As you know, if there is a flare up, we'll be the ones that go over there first to deal with it. After that it kinda depends on the day. Some days we'll be out in the field setting things up or running through practice operations or other field maneuvers. Other days we'll run through different tactical scenarios in the bay. Now you two are familiar with sand box drills, right?”

“Yes, Sergeant,” we both answered.

Sand box drills were not making reference to operations in the Middle East or having to go through some serious physical training in boot camp. Instead a sand box drill was a little bit more of a sophisticated sand castle that instead resembled a certain area. Hills were made and the contour of the land shown by sculpting the sand. Usually the sand was painted to give the creation a little more geographical correctness, showing lakes or ponds, green grass, or tan sand. Buildings and roads were placed where needed, as were trees, bushes and other natural landmarks.

The Admission

“We’ll run through some sand box drills a few times a week,” Sergeant Dennis continued. “It just helps to keep us thinking when new situations are brought up in the TDGs when we can actually plot everything out in front of us. That’s what takes up the most of our time. We’ll also act as a provisional security force, backing up the SRT.”

Miles and I had both heard of SRTs before. They were the Military Police version of a SWAT team. Special Response Teams were the fast action force for security purposes. I was glad to hear that we would have all these chances for quick and dangerous work. Although, on the other hand, I was a little bit nervous, too. After all, I was the new guy to this unit and I would be looked at as an outsider until I could really prove myself to these men that had already established themselves in Second Recon Battalion’s Recon Platoon. It was what Miles and I had talked about before as the fear of the unknown.

“Now look,” Sergeant Dennis continued, “I might as well lay down the rules for you now, just so we can get the little unpleasanties out of the way. Are either of you 21?”

“No Sergeant,” Miles and I said shaking our heads.

“Alright. I don’t give a fuck if you drink on one condition. Don’t be stupid about it. Be responsible enough to know when to quit. If you’re gonna get so drunk you pass out, at least be decent enough to do it in the barracks. If you’re out somewhere and you get a little too drunk to get back on your own, call your fire team leader or me and we’ll come get you. Granted I’ll make fun of you and make you feel horrible for it, but I’ll get you. Next and probably most obvious, do what you’re told. If you don’t understand or don’t know how to do something just ask. That would sure as hell beat doing it wrong and then having to do it all over again. If you have any problems or concerns see your fire team leader. If Al can’t get it taken care of to your satisfaction it comes to me. But that’s only after you take it to him. If there’s something you’d rather talk to me about, just tell Al that you’ve got something you’re going to talk to me about. But it would be best off if you could talk to him first. Are there any questions?”

“No, Sergeant,” we both answered.

“Good. Then I’m right next door if either of you need anything or have any questions.”

Entering our room, which had been unlocked by Miles during our conversation, we both sat down to relax. While we had only spent one night in this room, it was beginning to feel somewhat like home to us both. Other than a fridge and a microwave it didn’t really have any of the other comforts of home really. I mean, it had a shower and those facilities there, but that’s just to be expected. It’s not like we were living in a squad bay with a few dozen other guys. Evidently Miles had been thinking along the same lines I was.

“Man, I think we need to get a TV to help give a little better atmosphere around the room here.”

“I agree. I was just thinking that our room needed a few more touches of home.”

“Yeah, well there’s nothing quite like actually being home. I sure miss being home in Alabama.”

The thick accent returned, reminding me that he really was from down south. It was always there, but you could always tell when he was thinking of home because it always got thicker. Looking back, that’s one thing that always stood out in all my memories of him.

“So do you want to go to the exchange to get a TV,” I asked.

“Might as well. We don’t exactly have anything else going on.”

Before we could leave, Sergeant Dennis knocked on our door again. This time, there was another face with him. I knew there would be quite the parade of new faces in the transition period, but I wasn’t expecting it to be at the barracks.

“Gents, I’d like you to meet Corporal Cook, your fire team leader.”

“Good evening Corporal,” Miles and I said.

“How are you two doing this fine evening,” Corporal Cook asked in a return greeting.

“Just fine Corporal,” I said. “We were actually just about to go to the exchange to get a television.”

“I see. Didn’t want to be bored out of your minds?”

“Yes, Corporal. It would be nice to have something to do other than stare at the walls.”

“Do either of you have a car?”

“Not here, Corporal,” I answered. “I’ve got one back at home I’m going to try to bring out soon.”

“Alright. I’ll give you a ride over to the exchange to help you out. That way you don’t have to carry a big box back here on your own and I can get to know you as our Squad Leader already has.”

“Good to go, Corporal,” I said. Little did I know at the time that Miles was letting me basically take charge as the senior man between the two of us. I don’t know if I actually had the seniority by way of time in grade or time in service, but he was content enough having me as the spokesman and the one in charge. I didn’t much care. I’d been in charge of people before and Miles was turning into someone I respected. It’s easy to have a leadership position over people you truly respect because it makes things so easy. The same could be said for those who are in charge of you. It’s definitely much better if you respect the person that’s leading you, which was starting to happen with Sergeant Dennis.

That’s where my thoughts were running as Corporal Cook led Miles and myself to his car. Our fire team leader seemed like he was a bit more relaxed than our squad leader. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying that our Squad Leader was an up tight prick or anything, but he’s got twelve Marines to look out for, but Corporal Cook only had three. Within reason, he could be a little more relaxed because he only had a quarter of the responsibility.

The Admission

Being a leader isn't always easy, especially when it's in a situation like this and there are lives on the line. Like I said before, I'm only in this to get myself killed. I'd feel like shit if someone else got killed and it was in any way connected to a mistake of mine.

On the reasonably short drive to the exchange, Miles and I again explained a little bit about ourselves, who we were and all that jazz. Corporal Cook told us a little about himself, throwing a little bit of humor here and there. When we got to the exchange, the three of us went back to the electronics section. While Miles and I were comparing TVs, Corporal Cook was perusing through the CDs. After some pretty careful consideration we decided on getting a set that had a DVD and VCR built into it. That way it could also double as our CD player without having any external gadgets.

Don't get me wrong, being a comm guy I was used to all kinds of gadgets being around. I just preferred to not have too much clutter around the room. There was certainly more than enough on my desk in the past. They say that a cluttered desk is the sign of a cluttered mind. Well then, what's an empty desk the sign of?

Before we made the short drive back to our barracks, Corporal Cook asked if we wanted to make a stop at the Commissary, what everyone else might refer to as a grocery store.

"Sure," I said. "It wouldn't hurt to grab a few things to stock into our fridge."

"Like a case of beer, right," Corporal Cook commented.

"Probably would get one, Corporal, but neither one of us are old enough."

"Well, I can tell you this. So long as there's none visible in the morning, should some of the higher ups go through the rooms, you'll be fine. Sergeant Dennis and I are the same way. We don't give a shit if you're drinking under age, so long as you don't do anything stupid. If you show the responsibility you should all the time, you'll most likely never have any problems with either of us."

Between the walk to the car dropping off the TV and the short stroll over to the commissary, our Fire Team Leader explained the leadership philosophy that was shared by him and our Squad Leader. Over dinner we had got the basic idea from our Sergeant, but it didn't hurt to get it phrased in a different way and in a different viewpoint either.

Miles and I already knew they were fine with underage drinking, which was nice. I liked having the ability to be able to relax with a nice, cold beer after a long day at work. But like they had both expressed, we had to be responsible about it and not do anything stupid. Namely, like someone who *had* been in the platoon had done and get in several fights while very much intoxicated. The part that really didn't help that Marine was the fact that he was eighteen.

"When you two go and fuck up," he continued, "which I hope for once doesn't happen, there's two things that we could wind up doing to you. First, the Sergeant and myself could just put you up on charges and let you fry for your mistake. You'll lose rank, money, free time or all of it. Or, one of us could just take you out back and beat the shit out of you. Most of the platoon would rather have a scar on their skin than a scar on their record."

Miles and I nodded slightly in agreement. The thought of having what little pay or freedom we had taken away wasn't a pleasing thought.

"That's the way we always did it back home," Miles said. "You fuck up or screw someone over, you get your ass kicked."

"Leave it to a redneck to only know how to fight and shoot," I replied.

"Keep it up and I'll kick your ass."

"It sounds like you two are becoming pretty good friends," our Fire Team Leader said.

"Yeah," I said. "But then again, at this point we really don't know anyone else. We met yesterday checking in and didn't meet anyone until you and Sergeant Dennis."

"Good, it's smart to have friends you can rely on. You also need to rely on your fire team and squad with what's bound to happen. We'll all need that good trust and teamwork."

We concluded our grocery shopping and Corporal Cook was even kind enough to buy the both of us a twelve pack.

"Just consider it a welcome aboard gift," he said. "There's just one condition. No proof of their existence lies in your room tomorrow. Get rid of them first thing in the morning or before."

"Should be easy enough," Miles said. "We've got to walk past the dumpster to get to work anyways."

"Of course if you meet me out in the parking lot, I'd be glad to give you a ride over there. Not that it's really that far of a distance."

"Any which way," I said, "it's just that much more energy we can save for later in the day."

"One other note for later on along the lines of beer in your room. For those Lance Corporals in the platoon of legal drinking age, you're allowed to have a six pack per legal Marine in your room. For NCO's it's a twelve pack. Then again, that's just for during the day when someone might be walking through the rooms. You can have a keg in your room for all the higher ups care, so long as there's no more than a six pack visible the next day."

"Thanks for the advice," I said. "I'm sure we'll get used to it more and more as time goes on."

On the ride back to our barracks, which was pretty much standard along Marine Corps living spaces, Corporal Cook got us spun up on a few more of the policies and procedures we could expect to deal with on a regular basis. They weren't all too strict by any means, but when you're in the military it reiterates the fact that you have very few freedoms. We have to sacrifice our freedoms to protect those of everyone else.

The Admission

I'm not saying that's always a bad thing, at least most of the time. The vast majority of the public, both at the time my military tale begins and where I'm at now, is that those in the military are some pretty brave people. Or else completely nuts. But then again, you'd have to be pretty crazy to voluntarily get into a position that could get you killed in short order. I mean, hell, look at me. How much more nuts can you be without being in some "institution."

Then there's the other half that see us as violent "baby killers." The fact of the matter is that we, those in the service, kill only when we have to. Oh, sure, there's been a couple bad seeds out there that might just go around shooting up random innocent bystanders, but don't just automatically lump the rest of us in with those psychos. That would be just like me automatically lumping you in with Hitler because you're German. And I'd guarantee you this, if I went and said something to that effect, those very same people would start screaming about racist or sexist comments, griping that in one way or another, I was discriminating against them. But it's perfectly alright for you to do it, isn't that right, you little tree hugging bunny lovers?

If you haven't been able to tell, I'm not too worried about offending anyone at this point in my life. If I say something that upsets you, then you probably had it coming to you. Payback is an expletive. There, I was decent enough to censor myself there. Are you happy now? I hope so, because you can't count on that ever happening again. I was just being nice because I'm in a good mood right now and you'll find out why later in the tale.

Any which way, and I apologize for these sidetracks, it's just that when something sparks in my head as worthwhile, I'd might as well tell you. Besides, seeing as how you're reading this, you're obviously interested in what I have to say.

When we got back to the barracks, Miles and I lugged our television up to our room with our groceries on top of the box. By the time we had the food stored and the TV set up it was pretty late in the day. I was looking forward to finishing off at least half of the pack that our Fire Team Leader had given me and watching whatever we could find on the tube. I didn't really ever watch that much TV, but there were times when it seemed like I did. It just depended on the programming that happened to be on at that time. As Miles and I had found out, our unit had provided free cable for the Marines and Docs that lived in the barracks. It was just a little effort to help improve morale. Fortunately it worked pretty well and it gave us plenty of programming to sift through.

Miles and I were just kicking back to watch a rerun when Corporal Cook knocked then entered our room. He introduced us to Jerry Johnson, the final member of our fire team. Lance Corporal Johnson was a grunt, just like Miles, but had not gone through the sniper training yet.

Jerry had apparently heard of Miles' shooting accomplishments in his previous battalion. Evidently my new roommate was one hell of a shot with both the M-16 and M-40 sniper rifle. While the word was that Miles could hit a target, target being a human being, at two miles, he claimed it was only a mile and three quarters.

Something told me he was just being modest.

After all, being the new guys to the platoon, we would be under enough pressure to perform. Having to shoot from that great of distance wasn't naturally expected of any sniper. That is, it's not expected until you prove time and time again that you can and will handle it.

Evidently Miles was one of those who had shown the ability to handle it several times over.

As Jerry had told us a tale he had heard, it involved said roommate of mine having shot a quarter from five hundred yards. While Miles tried to play it off, the three of us could tell by the look in his eye and the tone of his voice that it was true.

Besides both being infantry rifleman Lance Corporals, Miles and Jerry had the common bond of both having been high school wrestlers. As our Fire Team had come to find out, they had both placed quite well in their high school state championships. I had the sneaking suspicion from the tone of Jerry and Corporal Cook's voices that there could very well be some pretty hard core wrestling taking place for PT before too long. PT, for those of you who don't know, is physical training, the Marine Corps version of working out.

Around 2130, or 9:30 at night for those of you who don't understand the twenty four hour clock cycle, Miles and I had finished off our beer and as a fire team, we all decided it was time to call it a night. It's not that any of us were really that tired, we just all wanted to get a good nights sleep.

When the lights were out and I was all nice and comfortable in my bed, I let my mind wander as was usual at this point in my day. As my mind drifted, as it so often did, I began to think about the man who was laying two yards away from me.

It was nothing sick, twisted or unusual, I just started to think about our relationship over the past two days. We had basically been tossed into an unknown world of a new unit and left to check in on our own. We came together right from the beginning, even through we practically came from different worlds. While I grew up in the fast paced world of Chicago, Miles was raised in the relaxed manner of the south.

All the while of checking in, we got to know each other that much better and I at least felt as if we were good friends, or at least going at a running start in that direction. Deep down in every inch of my heart and soul I hoped he felt the same way. It was a time in life again that I could use a good, close friend.

If my judgment of miles was accurate, as my assessments usually were, he would be the friend I had been wanting for the past seven years.

'Time will tell, Josh,' I thought to myself, before letting my mind drift once again.

The Admission

I thought again of Bobby, my friend of long ago and I saw various similarities in my new friend here. They were both skinny but strong beyond their means. They were calm, cool and collected, nothing seemed to bother them. They were both easygoing and athletic, even liking the same sports of soccer, baseball and wrestling.

As that thought drifted across my mind, I realized my thoughts of when Miles and Jerry were talking about most likely wrestling each other in the next days. While they had been talking about doing that, my mind had gone back in time many years and pictured that it was Miles, not Bobby, that I had slimed and then wrestled in the ooze. It was a thought that had returned to my mind several times since it was first formed in the back of my head.

I chuckled as I thought about how he'd think I was nuts for doing that way back when. But hey, boys would be boys. After all, they even had a cable TV show back in the 80's with these kids that would get slimed seemingly at random. Crazy and messy stuff like that is a part of every childhood, at least it should be. It was sure a good memory for me.

It would have been one for Bobby too, had he lived long enough.

I continued thinking about the next day and what it would hold. The anxiety of the unknown crept into me a little more but I forced myself to relax.

'You've made it through worse, Josh. This will sure be better than boot camp. It sure as hell couldn't get much worse.'

I thought that I could at least wear off a little stress in a couple of wrestling matches with Miles and Jerry. While I had never been a state contender wrestler in High School, they both admitted their skills had lacked in the years since graduating. I may not always be able to beat them, but I'd at least be able to handle my own against them. With a little luck, I might actually be able to beat one of them.

It would be nice if that were the case. It would help to prove to those two that, while I wasn't a state champ qualifier, I could hold my own against them. It's not that I wanted to have the dominance over them, with them knowing I could beat them at their own game, I just wanted to win. I was sure that, with time, my skills as a black belt in Taekwondo would be tested against them as well as their wrestling skills would be tested against me.

Though a bit restless, I did finally get to sleep and awoke promptly when our alarm clock went off. I went in to take a shower as Miles was sluggishly sitting up in bed. Along with a couple of nice cool, seriously caffeine laced sodas, a nice hot shower really helped to wake me up in the morning. I'm not saying that I couldn't start my day without them, but I always took advantage of those little perks when I could. After all, when we were off on some deployment in some foreign land, we wouldn't have those luxuries.

When I emerged from the head with a towel around my waist, Miles was pretty quick to move in. Evidently it was just as much of a part of his morning necessities as it was mine. Well, maybe not necessity, but at least routine.

After we were both shaved and mostly dressed, we opened the door to let in some of the morning. Might as well enjoy the beginnings of a late February day while we laced on our boots. The cool crisp air felt good as we properly covered the top of our boots with our cammie pants.

The purpose of that, blousing your boots as it's called, is an effort to be able to prevent bugs, pests and other creatures from being able to crawl up your leg. It's a little tidbit of knowledge Miles definitely learned later in life.

Don't worry; you'll hear that part of the story when we get there.

Just as we had both leaned back in our chairs, Corporal Cook stopped in front of our open door.

"You two ready to go," he asked.

"Yes Corporal," we both said as we grabbed our tops. We both knew from the night prior that he would be stopping by to give us a ride over to work. It's not like it was all that far, maybe a half of a mile or a little longer, but it still helped to conserve as much of our inner energy as we could. When we came out of the stairwell, Jerry was sitting on the hood of Corporal Cook's car.

"Fucker," the Fire Team Leader blurted. "How many times do I have to tell you? You sit in my car, not on my car."

"Yeah, yeah," Jerry said, sliding off the car before looking at me. "I always forget that part."

Miles and I rode in the back seat while the two experienced members rode up front. On our short trek to our workplace Corporal Cook explained what the next few days would hold for us. Basically, through the end of the week we would be working together quite a bit on fire team and squad movements. We evidently had a lot of catching up to do with that, which I expected, in order to be proficient enough to truly handle operations with this platoon.

Like I said, I expected that. These are people that we were going to be working alongside every day and when the shit hit the fan we would need to work together as a well organized unit. As I understood from what our Corporal was telling us, the majority of the movements and operations we would be doing would be on a fire team level. That would eliminate the need for too much training or worry over squad tactics. What we would need to know would be covered through the first part of next week.

Then would come the fun part.

Corporal Cook told us that in a week we would begin our seven day shift as provisional security. During that time I would be working side by side with Corporal Cook while Miles would be with Jerry. While we would be briefed and instructed as to our roles during that period, we basically knew most of what we would need to know from our Recon training. After all, we had spent a full and very serious week covering that information. As the four of us knew from our trainings past, you learned a lot more by doing on the job training.

The Admission

We pulled into the parking lot and went inside to the briefing room after passing through the security checkpoint at the fence surrounding the building. Miles and I hadn't seen this particular room so it was a very interesting sight to behold. In fact, all we had seen so far was the Gunny's office and the short distance to the door.

The briefing room had twelve tables, each of which was surrounded in a half circle by four chairs, arranged to view the presentation screen at the front of the room. A single fire team used each table during these briefings and other planning meetings.

The four of us took our seats around our table. The chairs we had were actually pretty nice. While I was expecting to see something along the lines of metal folding chairs, our actual seats were closer to being a recliner. The high backed chairs came complete with cup holders installed in the armrests. If anything they were over padded, if that was possible.

Merely two minutes later, Gunny Price walked in to begin the briefing. Part of our checking in the day before was being "read in" to our new Top Secret Security Clearance, which we were informed we would need for this brief.

"Good morning Marines," Gunny Price started. "Since I see that everyone is here, let's begin. For those of you who didn't know, we have two new members joining fourth squad replacing Hutch and O' Riley. Please take the time as you get a chance to introduce yourself to these two and make them feel welcome. I'll also need their Squad and Fire Team Leaders to ensure that they are up to date and fully current with the news by the end of today. I'll fill in what I can throughout the brief, so bear with me on the repeat information.

"With that in mind, let's turn our attention to the news of today, as determined by the J-2."

The J-2 was the Joint Forces Intelligence branch of the military in the Pentagon. Their sole purpose in life was to gather intelligence of military interests and pass the appropriate information to the appropriate units. The unit briefings that were held in units like ours gave those units an idea of what operations and deployments they might be involved with before too much time.

Miles and I were about to get an idea of what world events could be our first taste of operations.

"Gentlemen, as always, this briefing is classified Top Secret. The information contained herein may only be discussed with those that have both the appropriate clearance and the need to know. Provided both of those conditions have been met, extreme discretion is required.

"Now that we've covered that nonsense, we can cover the important stuff. The big worry right now from the folks there at the Potomac Puzzle Palace is still the Russian Navy's bake sale. Naturally, we're watching to the best of our abilities where they're going. The big worries are that some nutcase Saudi or crazed Ayatollah is gonna get their hands on one.

"The second thing keeping them busy at the five sided squirrel cage is an abundance of internet efforts trying to compromise the security systems and gain access to classified materials. So far they've been unsuccessful in all of their attempts. Thanks to the talents of some of the hacker pros there, we've learned two very important things. First, the major thing that they're interested in is our avionics and airborne radar systems. Second, we've learned the location of where the hackers have been doing their dirty work."

"So where are they, Gunny," Sergeant Dennis asked.

"Well, Sergeant, since one person asked, I know it's on the minds of probably everyone else. These hackers, who have been pretty successful at getting through some of the systems, are in Jinan, Capital of the Shangdong Province in China. Their front is a software engineering company, but a certain American agency has been tracking their illegal Internet activities for several years now. It's apparent now that we're not the only ones they're sneaking and peeking at either. Great Britain, Ireland, Russia and South Korea have also been under their prying eyes.

"Some of the expert hackers at Crypto City have battled back, formatting the hard drives and tinkering with other facets of the computer's components. Basically reminding them that payback's a bitch.

"Being that this building is outside of town, the thoughts are that we may be able to destroy the building, or at least a significant part of it. The preliminary guesses are that these efforts are coming from a back corner of the building, well out of view from the street. We'll be getting maps and other information from the 2 this morning. They were just refining the maps and trying to add a little more detail to them before sending them over. I know we all hate patchwork intel. Having to fill in holes later isn't good practice.

"That's the news fills for now. Like I said, nothing really new except for that location that would be all too pressing. Last thing I want to cover before we break for action is a couple of new additions. As I mentioned before, we have two new Marines here with us today to replace the two we lost on Friday. Lance Corporal Miles Davison will be replacing Hutch and Lance Corporal Josh Roark will be replacing O' Reiley. Throughout the course of the day I'd like all of you to introduce yourselves to these two Marines. While I know that they have met their Squad and Fire Team Leaders, it would be good for platoon operations and morale if everyone got to know these Marines and vice versa if we all made the attempt to get them to fit in as quick as possible. Sergeant Dennis, I know you and Corporal Cook probably have some hijinx planned, but be gentle. We need them in good form.

"Duty schedule is as follows. Third squad, those of you here at least, you have the React duty this week, so you're on call. Fourth squad, fire team tactics today, squad tactics tomorrow. First Squad, you're backup for third in the unlikely event they need it, with your rappelling and climbing training taking the rest of your time. Second squad, to give you a break from your past week, you'll be working hard and heavy doing Potential Mission Planning. That's it, let's break for the day."

The Admission

Instinctively, both Miles and I turned to our Fire Team Leader. Fortunately we weren't just being the helpless Newbies, Johnson was turning that way as well.

"Alright, here's the deal for us," Corporal Cook started. "The three other teams in our squad are obviously pretty well off on their training for squad and fire team tactics, the schedule was just set up like this to give you two the benefit of getting used to the way we work. It's not that we don't think you know what you're doing. We just want to make sure we're all working together.

"So today we'll be working patrol formations in the morning and then fire tactics in the afternoon. Then we're going for a good old fashioned PT run and workout, which will end our day. Once Sergeant Dennis clears us, we'll get our weapons, then make the short trek over to LZ Mallard to do our practice. Any questions?"

The three of us shook our heads. It was a clear and concise explanation that didn't leave much room for doubt. I definitely respected his straight forward, no bullshit approach to things.

"Good, I didn't think there would be, but I do feel it necessary to check. With that, Sergeant, since you're here now, what do you have for us for today?"

"First and foremost, I just want to reiterate to the newbies, keep on your toes and keep your head down. You never know what surprises may come at you completely unexpectedly. But if you keep your head down in action you're less likely to get noticed. Second, I know you're all getting to know each other pretty well within the team, which is good. I just want you to take a little time before you split for your training for a little getting to know the squad. Nothing really more than a brief intro, just enough to give you an idea as to who's who and what they do. Anyone have anything for me?"

"No Sergeant," we all said. Like I said before, the whole using rank so much may sound really repetitive and sound like some serious ass kissing, but it's just good military respect.

"Alright, then let's meet the squad. After that, Corporal Cook will get you caught up on the news to give you a better idea of the history of what you heard this morning. Then you'll split for the LZ to do your training."

Meeting the rest of the squad was just as quick and concise as Corporal Cook's earlier instructions. Fortunately to my noticing, I wasn't the only one who was showing interest in two certain squad members. Lance Corporal Mike Coffin, our squad's armorer, and Lance Corporal Eric Johns, our Combat Aidsman.

An armorer, or gun Bunny as referred to in SRTs in good humor, is the person responsible for fixing the weaponry of the unit. While our platoon had one designated to work solely in our gun cage, it also worked out that there was one in each squad. It was amusing how there was such a good knowledge of weapons in a platoon like this. Go figure, a bunch of gun toting Marines. Armorers, at least the good ones, didn't just know how to fix the weapons with practiced proficiency, but they were truly expert shooters as well. If you got to know them and they liked you well enough, you could find them very willing to pour the gun related contents of their brain onto your learning platter. This is why Miles and I had taken the special interest in him.

Combat Aidsman is a term lost even on some who have been there and done that. A person holding this title is the medical first responder for their section. Section though is a loose definition. That can mean the responsibility of anywhere from a couple of platoons, but usually limited to a couple of squads. The Combat Aidsmen of our platoon only had a single squad to worry about.

Those that do know about medics in the Marine Corps will be wondering where the Navy Corpsmen is. Well, our platoon does have two, and a platoon like this in combat could keep them busy enough. And as I had mentioned, the Combat Aidsman is just a first responder, someone who can take care of the medical problems at hand until the Corpsmen go there to finish the job.

I wasn't too worried about getting myself the potential medical attention I might need in a combat zone, but I was concerned about my friends. Like I said, I'm only in this to get myself killed, not someone who might have some reason to live. While I have a death wish for myself, I have what I guess you could call a life wish for my friends. I want no harm to come to them and I'll do everything I can to ensure their safety and well being.

That should explain my interest in our CA.

I'm sure Miles's thoughts were somewhat the same, in keeping his friends safe, but there were also those of self preservation. A brief conversation followed through the squad as I was thinking this, which concluded with our Sergeant's instructions to continue the conversations later. His idea, that it would be easiest to do this at the barracks that evening, was I thought right on the mark.

Corporal Cook had momentarily disappeared as the squad broke for action and Jerry told us we were supposed to go back to our table. As we sat down, our Fire Team Leader reentered the room with several large files and a laptop. When he sat down, after setting the materials on the table, he told us he was going to be getting us caught up on the news of the world that we wouldn't be hearing on cable TV news.

"After the Gunny's urging at the beginning of the brief," he said, "I figured it would probably just be best to get this out of the way as soon as possible. After all, I'm sure you probably have enough questions about what's going on and what the deal is with what was passed in the brief.

"As the Gunny mentioned, Russia seems to be selling their old diesel subs off as soon as they can to whoever will buy them. Hopefully we'll be able to intercept any communications if some Middle Eastern country or organization buys

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one. It's not that we don't trust Iran, Syria or Saudi Arabia, but we would like to know what's going on. After Ayatollah Khomeini's actions way back when, I think we have about every right to be suspicious."

The three of us at least had a pretty good idea of what he meant by that. While we were all pretty young at the time, Corporal Cook being the oldest at ten, all remembered hearing something about the Ayatollah's death in 1989. Incidentally, we all also remembered a statement that he made about how "There is no room for play in Islam. It is deadly serious about everything."

Let's face it, this was a founding statement for a lot of today's radical Muslims. With a serious dedication, he jumped into a devout study of Islamic Theology. After a great deal of learning and practice, he attained the rank of Ayatollah, which is a religious title labeling a higher scholar, yet held no political backing.

In 1962, the Shah of Iran took a measure to allow local officials to take their oath of office on the holy scripture of their choice. To some, that might sound like a nonsense issue, but it was an issue that deeply offended Khomeini and many other fundamentalists like him. The ensuing uprising caused by Khomeini's supporters prompted the Shah to send Khomeini into exile in 1964.

Khomeini then led a charge for the "corrupt" government to be replaced by a religious state throughout the 60's and 70's. His support grew larger and larger until 1978 when demonstrators, largely in student populations, shook the regime. In the year following, the Shah fled into U.S. protection.

Naturally, it had to be Khomeini that consumed the power of the country. He appointed himself the supreme ruler and assembled a parliament of clerics who took their orders straight from him in Tehran.

At the end of '79, with Khomeini's support, a group of student radicals seized the American Embassy and held everyone hostage. This was, as they claimed, a retaliatory action for America's protecting the Shah. The more than year that followed crippled the American Presidency and eventually partially led to Regan's defeat of Carter. When the Shah died, the hostages were released.

Oddly, it was the day of Regan's inauguration.

The U.S. went so far as to aid Saddam Hussein, a move regretted to this day, to battle against Khomeini's radicals through the Iran Iraq war. Eight years later, with the resources of both countries depleted, a general peace agreement was settled on, amazingly coordinated by the U.N.

So why the long, drawn out explanation of it? Well, it should be pretty damn obvious by now, and if it isn't you should definitely be doing your homework on this subject, because you really have no idea how much it plays into our world today.

In the basics of it, though, I'm sure you can at least get a good grip on how Khomeini was in the simplest terms, the founder of the Muslim anti-American movement. From there you should be pretty much able to tell why we don't want another Ayatollah getting in charge over there and getting ideas.

Especially if he can get his hands on an old Russian sub. An old fashioned diesel could be dangerous enough, let alone a new fangled nuke. Hopefully you're following along now. If not, sorry, I'm not explaining that situation any farther.

So anyways, back to the main topic, we were watching where the Ruskies were selling their subs. South Korea and Taiwan had already purchased a diesel each. North Korea was interested in getting their hands on a nuclear sub, as our Intel assets had learned.

That was something else that was pretty damn scary if you asked me. It's long since been known that North Korea has been pretty actively going forth on developing nuclear weapons. About the last thing everyone wants is one more nation sitting there with nuclear capabilities. If we got into another war with them, you know the Chinese would back them just like they did before. That'd be just great, wouldn't it? Three countries with nuclear capabilities going to war with someone's finger on the button.

Fortunately, the Russians hadn't sold anything nuclear to anyone but China. We weren't too worried about that, seeing as how China has the abilities to produce their own nuclear weapons or subs. Whether buying them from Russia or manufacturing them on their own, China definitely had the capability of obtaining them one way or another.

China just happened to be the other key point we were watching anyways. As the Gunny had mentioned in the brief, these Chinese hackers were essentially spying on Russia anyways to obtain military material, why not try to do some of it legally to try and make it look legit?

That's the way I'd do it at least.

Their hacking efforts, again, as mentioned in the brief were directed towards researching information on avionics and other electronics systems. After all, if they were legitimately getting a near top of the line sup setup from the Russians, why would they need to try and steal too much of the information than what they were buying? They could and were deploying their electronic thievery measures in avenues of gaining the information that they hadn't just rightfully purchased at a very minimal cost. You know how it is, the least they could get away with spending.

But while giving these pretenses of gaining everything as legally as possible in view of the world, or at least those who even cared to look, they were still hacking and spying electronically from their high tech offices outside of Jinan. They were nearly successful in slipping through a research and development computer at the Naval Air Station Pautuxent River. It was just too bad that the person who was at the terminal at that time happened to be a former CIA agent. The man's

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aeronautical engineering degree brought him a change in career when he had wanted it, but his skills of former employ as an anti-hacker of sorts still kept pretty sharp in his mind.

Now that we knew basically who and where they were, there were also plans in line for a counter Intel campaign. By that I mean that certain intelligence agencies would place false information out there and let these cyber villains get it. The security around it would be tough, as they would expect, but it wouldn't be as hard for them to get into as the real information. Then, naturally, when the hackers got hold of the information, they would think that it was the real information that they were looking for, not something that had been made up to fool them.

Some plans had been thought out in such great detail that the equipment, if set up according to the schematics, would effectively sabotage the equipment that it was building. When the device was turned on, it would short out in some area, blow a capacitor or render itself useless in some other way. All at the cost of a lot of time and money to these people who couldn't afford to do things the legal way.

After forty five minutes of being 'spun up' on these two major issues and a few other minor topics, Corporal Cook took the briefing materials back while Jerry took us over to our would be armory. It really wasn't an armory to Marine Corps standards, more of what would be called a gun cage, which was exactly the term we had for it here.

Jerry explained that we would have to fill out all the appropriate info that would be needed for being able to check out our rifles in the future. The only time consuming part of it was filling out the card to get the sling and magazines, and then filling out the rifle card. A rifle card is basically just like a library card, just used to check out something totally different.

With that mundane task completed, Miles and I got our rifles, to be immediately followed by our two counterparts. With our light gear on, we made our way along a short trail to LZ Mallard. An LZ, as you may or may not know, is a landing zone. Throughout Camp Lejeune, they are named after various birds. The one I had found the most amusing was LZ Kiwi. Yes, a landing zone named after a flightless bird. Pretty ironic, huh?

The particular LZ we were headed to held not only a wide open field to practice rushes and airborne operations, but also had several trails surrounding it as well. Plenty of options for practice, not that we didn't know what we were doing. Again this was just to get used to doing it with the fire team.

As we got near the LZ, we got into a diamond formation with our leader at the point and Jerry walking backwards at the rear. It was a unique talent I could tell had taken him a lot of time and effort to master. He seemed to know very well without looking when there was an obstacle he would need to step over or around. Either he was good, or he'd been over this trail way too many times. I didn't doubt either option.

After making the initial approach into the LZ we took a knee in a circle, facing outboard to receive our instructions. The instinctive habit of putting our backs to each other just allowed us to watch for any threats that might pop up to cause us a problem for us. Our leader explained, not for Jerry's benefit, that the trail we would be going along had several tests and traps to help training formations. While it would be easy if they weren't, the booby traps and would be ambushes were changed on an irregular basis. No one ever said this training was supposed to be easy.

After a brief but thorough description of what to look for, he asked if we had any questions. It's not that he thought we were incompetent or didn't know what we were doing, it was just that he wanted to make sure we knew what the hell was going on.

When it was clear we were set, we arose slowly from our one kneed kneeling position, keeping an eye out for any threats that we might have missed. There wouldn't be anyone out here looking for us today, but anything worth doing was worth doing right. After all, the squad needed us to be in top form in short order. More importantly to me, Jerry and Corporal Cook needed us ready PDQ. Pretty Damn Quick.

Like I'd said before, I'm only in this to get myself killed, not one of them. But I was also figuring that if I proved myself really quick, I'd earn my rightful place of acceptance into the squad and platoon. When that happened, I might get the good close friend I'd been wanting for so long. That might actually have provided something worth living for.

As we headed off down the trail of training, I put on my game face with the intent of perfection in my heart. I knew that I probably wouldn't be perfect, but it was worth a shot at least. Especially since, at worst, it would bring out my best.

Several hundred feet down the trail I began to wonder. I figured that whoever planned these tests would have wanted to start things off with a bang, even if it was a mock explosion. When my anticipation was drawing to a point of unbearable, I spotted one of those things that really just did not belong there on the forest floor.

If you weren't looking for it, and fortunately I was, you might have missed it or underestimated what might look to most as a twig resembling a chicken's foot. With the training I had been through, that we'd all been through, I was able to spot it readily and call it for what it truly was.

"Mine," I said, not taking ownership of the object, but instead pointing out the explosive trap. Removing a small flag from the cargo pocket of my pants, I carefully marked the mine so that, had there been anyone following us along the trail that day, they would have spotted the mine easier than I did.

Standing back up, I looked at Jerry, who had been watching me mark the hazard. With a smirk on his face, he slowly nodded once. While I didn't know him too well at the time, I was pretty sure it was a small sign of saying, 'Good work.' I just simply gave a slight nod and slowly stood back up. Instinctively, I checked all around me to make sure there were no threats.

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Just after my ‘Threat Scan 360,’ we stepped off once again. I hoped I would be able to spot more of the potential targets as easily as I’d spotted that one. I had the thought run quickly through my mind that I’d like to spot every threat. But it went as quickly as it had come. If I spotted every threat, it wouldn’t give the rest of the team the training they were here for as well. Plus it might make them think I was some kind of hot shot show off, trying to make myself seem perfect. I definitely didn’t want them to think I was trying to belittle them.

I should probably also explain a term I just used. Threat Scan 360 is basically another way of saying watch your ass. You basically just take a quick look all around you and observe for any threats. Once you did that, you pretty much had a good idea what was going on around you and you basically just used the force to sense any changes around you.

We stepped off again to continue the trek. Only our Corporal really knew the route we were taking. The rest of us merely needed to follow the leader. Had this been real, that wouldn’t have been the case though. We would all know exactly what was going on and right where we needed to go. That way, should anything happen to our leader, the mission could still get accomplished. Here, though, there was very little risk of him getting killed or otherwise incapacitated. Even if he did, we knew how to get him out.

As we continued on, I developed a great deal more respect for Jerry. The situational awareness he was showing was truly amazing to me. He would simply sweep his vision from side to side without showing a need to look behind him, which would have been to the front for the rest of us. He seemed to have eyes in the back of his head, or a psychic sense allowing his minds eye to know exactly what was going on. To me, it showed how skilled he really was with patrolling abilities.

When we had gone all of maybe twenty yards, I spoke again.

“Mine,” I repeated myself. I had spotted the spike once again. I was glad my training was paying off so well, but I was starting to almost feel bad. I’d always had a pretty humble attitude and I hated how it seemed like I might be trying to show these guys up. I mean, Corporal Cook was about ten feet ahead of me on the trail. He’d seen it right? At least he should have. He wouldn’t just let something like that slip by, would he?

To a point I could understand his doing that. It would help miles and I get used to spotting what would be the real thing. On the other hand, we were supposed to be training as if this were the real thing. If this had been the real thing and those mines had been live, I could have been killed. Granted, I wouldn’t have minded that one damn bit. But then again, there was a very high probability, probably pretty damn close to a sure thing, that a team member would have been hit in some way, very possibly quite seriously.

I wouldn’t have minded if a mine had taken me out. But if the fragmentation from it so much as caused one of my friends here to shed one drop of blood, I would have felt guilty as hell throughout my eternity.

Like I said before, I’m protective as hell of my friends, and that’s what these men were becoming to me. Damn good friends at that, and except for Miles, I hadn’t even known them a full day yet. Just that one extended conversation the night before as well as their actions and attitudes during our first work day together had brought out a true respect in me for them. But right now, suddenly, here I was having doubts, second thoughts, as to the faithfulness of our Team Leader and his dedication to our team.

I hoped I was just thinking too deep into it. It wouldn’t be the first time I had.

“Dam, Josh,” Corporal Cook said. “That’s two. I guess it’s time I got serious. I can’t let a fucking newbie out do me here.”

He’d said it with a smirk on his face and something in his tone softened the edge I felt. The better part of me then thought he’d just let those pass by to test me.

But there was still a little doubt.

By the time the training trail had ended, we’d all spotted our own fair shares of booby traps and would be hazards. From trip wires to various other types of mines, and from fallouts to fake snipers posing as bushes, our eyes were truly tested.

All throughout our little nature hike, Jerry walked backwards, never missing a beat, taking very few glances over his shoulder to check his position amongst the team. In his walking backwards, while being unnatural for most, it was so simple to him that he was able to spot a very well hidden mannequin that had been set up so as to potentially attack our fire team after we had passed it’s position.

Only the shape of the barrel under it’s camouflaged netting allowed Jerry to spot it.

We took seats on log stumps at the direction of our leader. Our morning training had apparently finished a few minutes sooner than had been planned on. It wasn’t a long enough period to go through the rush course and it definitely wasn’t long enough to go back over the trail.

We took our chance to rest while we could. General rest fell into the same boat as sleeping, eating and going to the head. You’d better do it when you get the chance, because you never know when you’ll get the chance again. Our leader told us that Sergeant Dennis should be arriving shortly with the takeout bags from the chow hall.

Before he’d made that comment, I really hadn’t thought about lunch. It had never really occurred to me that I hadn’t had anything to eat all day. Fortunately I wasn’t really that hungry. I knew I would be shortly though, thanks to the unconscious thoughts of what’s to come.

As we relaxed in the circle we formed, each of us found ourselves constantly checking our surroundings. It’s not that we expected any threats to pop up and we weren’t even too anxious for Sergeant Dennis to show up. It was still the

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continuation of protecting each other and ourselves. To a good small unit, as we hoped to become, it was one of the most important things we could do.

We chatted in the general small talk of military topics and tactics, the kind of talk that seemed important just then. Of course it was our job, a job we all willingly accepted, so it should be pretty important to us.

Sergeant Dennis showed up before my stomach could grumble in protest. The brown bag lunches were passed around while our squad leader pulled up a stump. Noting the extra lunch bag, I knew that he would be staying with us through lunch. I hoped this would be the way things stayed, as I liked the camaraderie of the small unit way of life. Everything that Sergeant Dennis and Corporal Cook had told Miles and I about the platoon had basically given us the idea that our deployments and operations would be done solely within our squad and fire team and I was just fine with that. About the only additions would be that Sergeant Dennis or one of our Docs might join us in a more direct manner in our efforts.

The general chitchat stopped as we ate our lunch and I continued to hope this was the way things would stay. Despite my desires to die as soon as possible, the only thing I wanted more was a true, close friend to live out the rest of my life with, regardless of how long or short it was.

Hopefully short.

As each of us was nearing the end of our food supply, Corporal Cook explained what we would be partaking in for the afternoon's training.

"Long version made short," he said, "We're going to make the circuit around the LZ. We'll just be doing rushes between obstacles, covering for each other while they're in motion, and I know that's really self-explanatory. Once we've completed the circuit, we'll turn right around and immediately continue on. After that first run through, we'll take a short break, then run through it twice continuously. We'll keep running through it, adding on another cycle as long as time permits. When we're done with this, it's back to the shack to turn in our weapons. Good enough?"

Jerry, Miles and I nodded, not that we had too much say in what went on. While I'm sure Corporal Cook would have listened to anything we might have had to say, it wouldn't have necessarily changed his mind on what would be happening.

"Once our weapons are back in the cage, we'll change over for PT then go for a little run, do another workout and then make that short run back. With that, let's continue our little break and let our food settle."

Each of us found it easier to work, especially through physical activities, when the food we had ingested began to be digested. Miles sat on the ground in front of his stump and closed his eyes to take a quick catnap. Jerry packed his trash into the smallest possible ball before stuffing it in the general purpose pack. He was then quick to follow Miles' restful lead as our leaders stepped off to the side. I had basically been volunteered for fire watch, the task of watching over everyone and everything in our area. I didn't particularly mind, it made me feel better and somewhat important. I had some good men to watch over as well as good weapons, not just the rifles either. I knew the deadly efficiency these Marines could show with their own bare hands, should the need ever arise.

"Roark," Sergeant Dennis called. "Come here."

"Aye, Sergeant," I replied as I got up and trotted quickly to where they were standing. "Yes, Sergeant?"

"Don't feel like resting up like the other Lance Corporals?"

"No Sergeant. I just thought someone would need to keep a watch out over everything."

"And you don't think we could do that?"

"I'm sure you could, Sergeant. I just didn't want to just kick back in a catnap like I was saying 'No Sergeant, you deal with the watch.' I know you'll look out for us and take care of our welfare, but I just think we should take care of each other too."

"I like the way you think Roark. You'll make a damn good leader some day."

"I'd like to think I'm a leader already, Sergeant, no disrespect. I mean, I've always been taught that every Marine was a leader, at least in some way. I just figured I'd better act like it."

My two leaders looked at each other in a moment of silent conference before Sergeant Dennis looked back at me and said, "All right, Roark. Go sit down, resume your watch."

"Aye, Sergeant."

I was proud of myself there. Throughout pretty much all of my teen years I'd had a bit of a nervous stutter that went along with a little fidgeting. All the while when he was asking me those questions, I didn't stutter and I didn't fidget. It seemed like my squad leader had the unique ability in his personality to bring out the best in me.

While I'm no psychiatrist, I figured I had at least a pretty damn good idea where that came from. It was from Bobby, who always seemed to be Mr. Cool, had never really had any problems like that and his persona just brought in out in me as well, at least for the most part.

Back then I wasn't as cool and debonair as he always was, but I was definitely well enough off. When he died, that demeanor left me with him. Just more than five years after Bobby's death, there was a person bringing this best of me out again.

Sitting back down, I did relax a little. Like I said, there was really no threat to us, it's not like we were sitting in a combat zone. If we were, Jerry and Miles sure as hell wouldn't be sitting there sleeping. While they might try to catch us off

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guard with a surprise attack, they'd more than likely let us get ready enough to handle ourselves properly. Training, training and more training. That's all it would take and that's what we would get.

So much of what Marines did, let alone in our platoon, was train and practice for the deployments and operations we hoped would never come. Bare in mind it was a world of relative peace at that point in time. It's not like there was really an imminent threat to us there on the home front. Not just then at least, and not that we knew about. So we were stuck with the routine of training evolution after training evolution.

After about fifteen minutes, Sergeant Dennis headed off down the same trail he arrived from while Corporal Cook came back to take charge once again.

"All right you slackers," he said. "Time to wake up and earn your lack of pay."

Miles and Jerry both picked their heads up and blinked profusely for a split second while eyeballing side to side. Sure enough, they had both been fast asleep during our noontime stand down. Miles looked at me and gave a slight nod. It was nothing much and it wouldn't have even been perceptible had we not held eye contact. It was just a quick motion, symbolic of thanks between friends.

We all stood and slung our rifles on our right shoulders, our dominant and firing arms. Jerry and Corporal Cook started off toward where we would be starting through the course. Miles and I were naturally right behind them, keeping a close formation. We all took a half kneeling, half prone position at the first birm while we were read the riot act of instructions. It's not that we couldn't figure out the routine for ourselves, it just let us know what our fire team leader expected. While some people may have found it belittling to have such a simple process explained in such detail to them, I kinda liked the fact that I would know exactly what my leader would be expecting of me.

With the lowdown laid out, we set our sights on the course ahead of us. When Corporal Cook clicked the hammer home on an empty chamber, Jerry and I charged to the next birm while Corporal Cook and Miles laid out imaginary cover fire. Slamming ourselves down on a borderline of serious discomfort, Jerry and I returned the favor of cover fire while our teammates caught up.

This method, the spring method as our fire team leader called it, would be one of two ways that rushes would be executed. The other, which we would be practicing next, was really just as simple and self explanatory as you might expect. Two members of the fire team would rush from point to point, and then would be followed by the other two members who would rush to the next vantage point. Pretty simple isn't it? The leapfrog method was easy enough for a simple minded redneck like Miles to be able to handle it without difficulty.

Not that Miles was stupid or anything, just a simple, easy going redneck.

We went through the course of action, one time through in each method, and slowly but surely the clock wound down towards quitting time for the day. After enduring a workout like we had been going through all afternoon, I didn't really feel much like going for a run, but I knew we'd be doing one anyways. We just had one more run through to do to make our fire team leader happy.

'Once more through,' I thought to myself as we prepared to challenge ourselves one last time. Naturally, once we'd started, that changed to, 'Well, this is it.' With a minor onset of muscle fatigue, the four of us were hitting the birms with a greater intensity than on the first go round. Each of us was also a little slower when it came time to get up and go. 'Had this been a real emergency,' we all knew there would be one solitary factor that would alleviate the strain we were feeling.

Adrenaline.

Oddly, we all shared a common link from previous experiences that had taught us that valuable lesson. In some part of each of our lives there had been such an intense situation that an injury had been overlooked for an extended period of time.

I thought back to the summer I turned thirteen, the summer before Bobby died. We had been watching a military comedy movie where, in one very opportune scene, involved one of the main characters getting into a mud wrestling match in a strip club. Naturally, with how many times Bobby and I had wrestled each other, we found it to be a very amusing idea. A half hour later he had led me over to what we then agreed would be the perfect spot for our rumble.

He had taken me to where the foundation for a house had been cleared out from the ground, but no cement had been put in place yet. The earthly walls made a perfect mud wrestling ring for us. We both shed our shirts and walked to our makeshift arena, with Bobby a few feet ahead of me. Just as he neared the edge of the foundation, his right leg sank, sending him into a spinning fall to the bottom of the pit.

Seeing what had just happened told me that a recent rain had made the walls soft mud as well. I looked down at Bobby and saw him laying spread eagle on his back in about a foot of mud, laughing. I couldn't help but hurl myself 'off the top rope' to deliver a good quality body slam to my friend.

We rolled around for a while before I wound up spinning him around and flinging him into one of the walls. The wall then absorbed his entire body. The shifting of support caused an avalanche, effectively sliming Bobby with more than his weight in mud. Not too much later, as we were hosing each other off, my head began to hurt. When it had been cleaned off, Bobby pointed out the fact that I had a dime sized gash on my temple. It seems that somewhere in our light contact brawl, I'd taken a pretty good blow to the head from Bobby or the mud floor. It was only after the adrenaline had begun to wear off that I started to notice a developing problem.

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While adrenaline was a serious plus in combat actions, it wasn't the only one. Protecting the friends to your left and right and not failing your brothers in arms was also a big deterrent of slowing down because you were hurting.

With one last plop down onto a birm, our training came to a conclusion. 'Not a moment too soon,' I thought to myself. It's not that I was out of shape or couldn't handle the training, enough was simply enough.

"Good work gents," Corporal Cook said. "Let's take ten before we head back. You three can nap if you want, I've got the watch."

"Aye Corporal," the three of us said. It was a traditional response to a traditional statement. His stating that he had the watch told us in itself we were free to rest. In a case like this it told us that he was taking the lookout for our safety and well being while we rested.

In other cases it could mean that he was taking over a post, like Corporal of the Guard or another higher billeted post. It then told us that he was the person in charge of that post and whatever posts it might be senior to. He would be giving orders and responsible for what we did and how everything was handled.

In either case it was a simple statement that confirmed he was in charge at that very point and 'ultimately responsible' for what happened under his watch, under his command. And to shoot down the thoughts some with a military mindset might have, yes a Corporal can 'take command.' Look it up in the dictionary and you'll see that it means to take charge. Isn't that what Corporal Cook was doing here? No kidding...

Miles, Jerry and I rolled onto our backs and laid our rifles on top of our upper bodies, being careful not to break the second rule of weapons safety and point our weapon at something we did not intend to shoot. It was one of the golden rules that men like us lived by. Granted it wasn't the only one, but it sure was an important one.

Before I knew it, I was zoning out, my mind was relaxed, and I was at peace. More or less. Granted I was still a jumble of depressive thoughts and suicidal tendencies, but at least I could be 'at harmony' in this very moment if nothing else. I was still aware enough of what was going on around me to be able to pick up the signs of some serious trouble and my subconscious had a fairly long list of things that fell under that category.

In my relaxed state, the ten minutes passed like ten seconds. While most people would have been annoyed with our fire team leader's awakening instructions to get ready to move out, I stood up feeling very refreshed. It was thanks to the mental discipline and relaxation techniques taught in the martial arts and recon training I had spent so much time in.

Heading down the same trail we came in on each of us took our appropriate spots in our patrol formation. It was just one of a dozen formations we had worked on in our morning training. The diamond formation was simply the easiest of them all for a small group like us to work with. At least it was the easiest one for this particular fire team. During the entire trek back, Jerry remained walking backwards and never once missed a beat. And as if it was a big surprise, we encountered no threats.

The thoughts ran through my mind again how I had thought Corporal Cook might have been trying to sabotage us along the training trail. Of course now, looking back at it, it seemed even more ridiculous than before. A mine like the ones he had missed wouldn't discriminate, they'd kill everyone and everything in their kill zone. His ass was on the line too and he would have been seriously injured at best.

After the more heartfelt and dedicated effort I saw from him throughout the rest of the trail and training, I realized I was a little off on my judgment. I had hoped then, and it turned out to be, that I was just thinking into it a little too deeply, worrying too much. I had always been a little uneasy about giving my trust to people I barely or didn't know. Some part of my instincts told me that this should be a different case. I had no damn idea why, but something told me that's the way I should do it. My instincts had got me this far in life.

I know it sounds weird to hear about a suicidal depressive like me being proud of how far in life my instincts had got me. Hey, I'm still suicidal, but much to my dismay, survival is instinctual. Besides, there have been points in my life when I've had to keep myself safe in order to protect my friends. I didn't want anyone to go through the mental or physical pain or suffering I'd been through. To me, that would be even worse than having to go through it myself. At least if I were going through it, it might actually push me that last little bit into finally killing myself.

Our patrol finally emerged from the woods on our route back to the compound. Even through the little knowledge I had of the layout of the base, I knew we were close to our home building. After all, we had taken the same route in the opposite direction earlier. We headed along the side of the road against traffic, getting a few strange looks due to Jerry walking backwards.

At seemingly long last, we arrived at our building. I know the route and distance would have seemed to go by a lot quicker if we'd been more engaged looking for alerting items. It had worked on the training trail that morning. If you had something like that to take your mind off the mundane, you wouldn't have much chance to think about how boring what your doing was.

We were let into our fenced in building by the armed and presumed heavily dangerous guard. He was a member of our platoon as well, so we knew he could be lethal enough without the rifle on his shoulder or the pistol on his belt. There would be twice on our guard week when we would be standing his post, a six hour task of walking the fence line and unlocking the gate for the proper people who needed to come or go.

After a compulsory wipe down, we turned our rifles into the gun cage. We all put our rifle cards back in our wallets that had been in our gear lockers for safe keeping. We all wanted to avoid the off chance of losing that handy piece of

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property. If we should happen to lose our wallet, which normally contained our military ID and meal card, it would mean a serious inconvenience. At worst it would mean an ass chewing and the potential black mark in a Service Record Book.

We regrouped at our ready table and waited as Corporal Cook was pulled aside by our squad leader, who was already in PT gear. It felt good to sit back in a nice comfortable chair for a little while and I knew I wasn't the only one that felt that way. Even in my relaxed state, I still noticed a few suspicious looks from our two leaders. I don't think Miles or Jerry noticed it, but it made me a bit wary as to what they might be planning. It was just a leery look with a sly smile that said to me that they were planning something.

"All right, Sergeant," Corporal Cook said, heading towards us. "We'll see you over there."

We? Over there? Oh yeah, something was definitely up. If that wasn't a menacing statement with an ominous overtone, I don't know what is.

"Ok you three," he said now addressing us. "Time for us to get our PT time in. I know we've all got our PT gear here, so let's get changed over and we'll go for our run. It'll be an easy run today, just a little past Mallard. We'll finish our workout here, check out with the COG to make sure there are no news bulletins for us, and then it'll be time to call it a day. Questions?"

"PT uniform Corporal," Miles asked. It was something I had thought to ask by my roommate had beaten me to. There were so many different ways that we could be dressed for our training. Plain green t-shirt, unit shirt, sweat shirt, sweat pants, Marine Corps green trunks and the "silkie" shorts that were fairly skimpy and hardly tolerable by most guys. Even just barely to those like us who were fairly good looking.

"Green on silkies," he said, almost causing a sigh of discomfort. Oh well, we'd all live through it, as much as we may not like wearing them. We reluctantly got up to change and one by one made our way into the locker room. All in all it was a pretty nice locker room, especially by Marine Corps standards. It didn't look all worn out like so many others and it certainly didn't have the funk a lot of other older rooms had. It didn't smell like a bed of roses, but it didn't smell like a landfill either.

Eventually our lockers would hold most of our battle gear. We were issued two of most of the important items, in order to be able to have one set at our rooms and one at work. This way, should an emergency, priority or alert call come in for our platoon or squad, we would be able to suit up properly. Granted, not *all* of our gear was in both places, but the essentials were. Miles and I had brought most of it in when we arrived earlier in the day. In most cases, we would be forming up at the compound before deploying, so if we got dressed at the barracks, we would be able to put the finishing few touches on at the compound.

Miles and I finished dressing just before Jerry and Corporal Cook did. Being that we were both "boot," or newbies to the platoon, we still both had the speed and intensity driven into us from recon and sniper training that had not been broken yet. Hen Miles and I headed towards the door, something kept Jerry back, even though he wasn't too far behind us in the changing process.

Miles and I were both stretching outside the building but still inside the fence when Corporal Cook exited with Jerry in town.

"Yeah, roger that Corporal," Jerry said exiting the building. "Shit, you know I'm up for it."

Uh oh. Suspicion levels at full alert again. What had they been talking about? What was Jerry up for?

I was sure I'd soon find out.

The gate guard let us out and soon enough each of us was stretched out and ready to go. We stepped off on our run and fell quickly into a two by two formation with our more experienced members leading the way. It was a nice run that wasn't too fast or too slow and it was good to just be out in the nature that was there, just to have time to think. In most unit runs like this there would be the unending choruses of running cadences talking about another C-130 rolling down the strip or little yellow birdies with little yellow bills.

'Gee, this looks familiar,' I thought as the trail we were running along took us through LZ Mallard. Our recreational jog took us along a short part of the training trail that our morning had been consumed by. I think we all found ourselves spotting several of the hazards noted earlier. Granted, while we had removed the red marking flags just after placing them, the mine were still noticeable to us since we knew where to look.

Coming into an open field, a human was silhouetted against the horizon, about a hundred yards straight ahead of us. Our course didn't divert and as we grew closer to this person, it became evident that it was Sergeant Dennis and that he was standing on the other side of a large hole in the ground.

We slowed to a walk a few yards before the hole. That was when Miles and I got our first look at what we later found out was a platoon tradition. This near perfect circle in the ground was ten feet deep and ten feet across at any given point, more or less. Looking to the bottom of "The Pit" I knew it would be several inches deep with mud. Before our squad leader addressed us, I had a feeling I knew what was coming. Mud wrestling. Yeah, half of our squad were high school wrestlers, the same with this fire team. Now we were standing before a large mud pit. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out this one.

"Shed the shirts and shoes," Sergeant Dennis said. My brain had barely comprehended his instructions as Corporal Cook and Jerry had peeled off their shirts and were tossing them to the ground to deal with their shoes. Miles and I were a

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little more reluctant, but did take off what we were supposed to. We all then stood a foot from the edge above the pit in our green silk shorts.

“Roark, Davison, you are here today to begin taking your rightful places in this platoon. Your actions in Recon School as well as your training today have shown that you deserve the chance you have been given in being here. You have volunteered to be assigned to this platoon and to truly be a part among your brothers in arms you must voluntarily take part in this initiation. In the pit you see before you, you will both wrestle a member of your fire team. It is not required that you win your match, but it is strongly suggested that you don’t lose. After you two newbies have taken on one of the experienced members of the fire team, the Royal Rumble will begin as you battle it out in a free for all, lasting ten minutes.

“We’ll hose off here, then go back to the compound where you can take a better shower. You will then be taken back to your barracks room where you will once again wear this uniform. You will stand at parade rest in your shower while the rest of our platoon will one by one throw a pie at each of you from the door.

“This is not hazing. I am not telling you to do something that I didn’t do myself when I joined this platoon. It is not being forced upon you to become a part of this platoon, but you are being *strongly* encouraged to partake in this tradition. If you will partake in this initiation on your own free will, take one step forward now.”

Both Miles and I did. We both now had our toes dangling over the pit we would be wrestling in momentarily.

“Very well and thank you. First match, Johnson verse Davison. After that pin Cook will battle Roark. First two, get in the pit.”

Jerry decided to lead by example, being the first one to take the plunge into the pit. His feet hit the mud and made a disgusting splat that reminded me of when Bobby belly flopped into the oversized pie. Miles jumped in beside him and they moved into position to begin wrestling each other. As they took the steps needed there was a sucking sound just as gross as the original splat.

“Now remember the rules, you two,” Sergeant Dennis said after they had shook hands. “Everything goes, so don’t pull punches and don’t be afraid to do some body slamming. We’re all tough enough to take it as well as we give it. Battle.”

The two mud bound warriors locked up. After getting nowhere doing that, Jerry landed a good swift kick to Miles’ stomach. With an intense groan, Miles dropped to his knees and put Jerry’s legs in a bear hug. After a brief moment of recuperation, my roommate threw his opponent off balance, tumbling into the mud. Several minutes of high school style wrestling followed with Miles delivering one good pile driver and Jerry performing a picture perfect DDT on his opponent.

They continued grappling for several more moments before Miles clinched having the upper hand on Jerry, who was hunched over in the grips of my new friend. Miles seized the opportunity and dripped his elbow to the back of Jerry’s head. Jerry fell face first, unconscious, into the mud where he was quickly pinned. Fortunately Jerry regained his senses as Miles pulled himself off to stand.

Jerry was helped to his feet by his opponent, who apologized for the harshness of the final move. Naturally it was accepted with a handshake between friends. Miles helped to lift his challenger out of the ring before being pulled up. Corporal Cook jumped into the ring and I knew that was my cue to get in there too. Before I could, Jerry stopped me with a look.

“Kick his ass for me,” he said very quietly.

I just nodded in reply. I’d never seen him wrestle, never seen him fight. I’d only seen Corporal Cook run and do hushes, how could I really promise an ass kicking? I’d just have to put forth everything I had and make sure it was better than what I was taking. Jerry extended his mud covered hand to me and I shook it. Now I felt, and really was, obligated to deliver, having shook into a promise with a man I wanted for a good close friend.

I jumped down into the pit with a splat that sounded the same as the rest. I looked at Corporal Cook, but for some reason I couldn’t make eye contact. I guess it was just too much guilt of the challenge just made. We shook hands and after separating by several feet we were told to ‘battle.’

We charged back in and after missing each other’s arms, we collided chests that sent us falling slightly backwards and more down as our feet went out from under us. He came out the better as his knee slammed into my nuts before my ass hit the mud. My shorts were the first thing to hit the mud other than my feet, followed shortly by my back as I rolled that direction in unbearable pain. I moved to my knees and curled up, my head just above the mud. My recovery was interrupted with a sharp elbow drop, which popped a few joints in my back. Adrenaline started to surge and finally the pain began to subside. However, it couldn’t prepare me for what happened next.

Corporal Cook knelt behind me and put his hands on my hips. After two quick by forceful slaps on my right butt cheek, he briefly shot his hips forward twice and called, “Yeah, who’s my bitch?” I was enraged. I knew it was a joke, just some serious shit talking, but for some reason it truly infuriated me. I quickly rolled over and made my kneeling lunge at my opponent.

I think everyone was surprised, they couldn’t believe the force of the gut punch I landed. I wouldn’t have even believed it if he hadn’t wound up slamming his face into the mud as he curled over. I grabbed his waist just right to deliver a DDT before body slamming him. I grabbed his hair and pulled him to his knees. After choking him until he lost consciousness, I grabbed his hair again before kicking his spine square between the shoulder blades, sending his unconscious, limp, rag doll like body flopping face first into the mud. When he awoke he was body slammed again. I pushed myself up to deliver a repayment knee to the groin. When he screamed out in pain, it tripped something inside my head.

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I suddenly became a blur of violent moves. We did grapple a small bit, of which I really don't remember. Miles told me later, after our showers, that it was a flurry of punches, kicks, knees and elbows. The next thing I remembered was laying face down on his back, holding him in a full nelson and rubbing his face around in the mud. As I got up, I could hear a soft sobbing, muffled by the mud. I had just snapped and really beat the living shit out of my fire team leader.

He did slowly stand up moments later, when I extended my hand to him. Once on his feet, he looked at me and extended his hand.

"Welcome to the platoon, newbie. Good match."

"Thank you," I replied so softly that I wonder if he actually heard it. Miles and Jerry returned to the ring at the direction of our squad leader. We took our time shaking hands before the last mud match, giving a chance for a little more recovery time. When all hands had been shook, we were instructed to put our backs against the walls. We were spread out every ninety degrees of the circle when the call was made. On the call of 'battle' we charged in and matched up with an opponent. Jerry and I matched up, seeing as how we hadn't tangled before. We kept wrestling, at less than full contact, for the full ten minutes, despite the fact I pinned Jerry several times without 'losing.'

At the end of our allotted grappling time, Sergeant Dennis called time. We shook hands around again before climbing out. I was almost disappointed I didn't get to wrestle Miles, but I knew there would be time for that later. Standing in a line next to each other, the mud was hosed off of us for the most part. We put our shirts back on and ran to the compound to take a much needed and wanted shower.

A quarter of an hour later, back at the barracks, Miles and I stepped into our shower after shedding our shirts and shoes at the direction of our Squad Leader. We stood side by side as our squad leader stood in the doorway, Jerry and Corporal Cook behind him with a pie in each hand. I found it interesting that the cream filled pies weren't in the usual pie plates, just in their crust. I found out later the plates were left back for convenience, for something else I'd find out about later.

Just before our squad leader addressed us, we both assumed a statue like position of attention. Neither one of us dared to move.

"As I see you are both ready to finish your initiations, it is time for you both to get pied by your platoon. One by one, your platoon members will file up to this door and fling one pie at each of you. Myself and the members of your fire team will be the first and last ones to hit you. Yes, we get to pie you both twice. I will remind you both that you will be at the position of parade rest and are not allowed to move one muscle. All you are allowed to do is close your eyes when a pie comes sailing at your face. You will be informed when the last three pies are coming at you. Are there any questions or hesitations," he asked as two pies were handed to him.

"No Sergeant," we said simultaneously.

"Then prepare yourselves to be pied."

We both quickly and properly snapped to parade rest. With a windup and a pitch, Sergeant Dennis accurately smacked our faces with a pie from a distance of five feet. One by one, the forty nine other members of our platoon stepped up to the door, identified themselves and slung their pies at us. Several had well placed pies too.

"Corporal Cook," we heard to start things off after our Squad Leader. The pie hit us both square on the front of our shorts and Jerry's impacted our abs. After the first fifty pies it was hard to breathe through all of the cream and crust. I badly wanted to wipe my eyes and mouth, by I kept my discipline.

"Last three pies," our Squad Leader said. "Sergeant Dennis."

Two more pies flew across the room with surgical accuracy, nailing our faces and snapping our heads back slightly.

"Cook," we barely heard through our cream filled ears. Little did we know he walked across the room and stood in front of me. He carefully pulled open my shorts and dropped his pie in before doing the same to Miles. As disgusted as I was, I kept my discipline.

"Johnson," we heard before Jerry walked behind us. After Corporal Cook's prank, I had a feeling something else would be done. Sure enough the back of my shorts was pulled down.

"Good game," Jerry said, rubbing his pie on my bare backside. It took everything I had not to move or otherwise make a sound. I knew Miles had the same feeling at his point of greatest discomfort as well.

"Marines," Sergeant Dennis said. "You have taken these pies well. You may now clean your eyes, but remove no other cream."

I heard a picture being taken just before we did what we had been wanting to so badly. Neither one of us touched any more of the cream after slinging the handfuls we had to the ground, only our eye sockets cleaned out. We replaced our hands behind our backs as we looked around. Miles was quite a sight to see and I knew I looked the same way. His shorts bulged in the back and I now was free to shudder at the uncomfortable feelings. Our front sides were at least three inches thick in most places and there sure as hell weren't any clean spots. There was a layer on the wall behind us and a few inches deep pile at our feet.

We were told to put our arms around each others shoulders. Doing so, another picture was taken. Corporal Cook told us to clean the cream off the wall and slop it at our feet. After that task was completed we were told to face each other and kneel. Oh yeah, I knew where this was going.

Miles and I clasped, or maybe a little more squished, cream covered hands before Jerry handed both of us a pie.

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“Slam it as hard as you can onto each other’s face,” he said. “Then it’s rumble time.”

Naturally, we were pretty quick to oblige. We both really wanted to get to wrestling each other. After some seriously intense wrestling, I was able to get the better of him. I caught a right uppercut to his stomach, followed by a light left uppercut to his nuts. I didn’t hit him so hard because he was really the closest friend I had, so I didn’t want to potentially jeopardize the friendship. Any which way, the combo moves left him hunched over for me to be able to choke him out and put him face down in a full nelson for the pin. I stayed there until he damn well knew he’d been pinned.

“Shit,” he said a moment after he’d regained consciousness. “Fuck man, get off me.”

I peeled myself off and helped him get back to his knees. We both slowly stood up, careful not to fall, before we clasped each other’s hands again.

“Good job you two,” Corporal Cook said. He and Jerry were the only witnesses to our match, with the door to the head being closed to ensure this. Jerry just nodded his agreement and pleasure at watching us tangle. “Take a shower and clean yourselves off. When you’re done, I’ve got a little present for you. Just meet me at my room.”

“Aye Corporal,” we both said. They left the room as Miles reached for the faucet.

“Well, much as we might not like it,” he said, “I think we need to take most of our shower together. That way we don’t track the cream anywhere else.”

“Good idea,” I replied. “If it wasn’t such a good idea, I’d think you were some kinda perv.”

“It was sure an interesting experience, wasn’t it? The getting pied then wrestling in it?”

“Sure as hell was.”

“Kinda a once in a lifetime thing.”

“Actually,” I said hesitantly with the water now flowing from the showerhead. I then regaled him with the tale of what Bobby and I had done that fateful thanksgiving.

“Fucking cool man,” he said when my tale was told. “I think my punishment for losing to you should be to get slimed. What do you think?”

“I think I’ll call Bobby’s Dad tonight and get the slime. Hopefully I can get it for this weekend.”

“Sweet shit, dude. I ain’t getting slimed naked though.”

“Good. Seeing him naked was bad enough. I sure as hell don’t want to see you bare assed.”

We both laughed and finished cleaning ourselves off. When most of the cream was watered down and into the drain I stepped out of the shower so he could drop his shorts in solitude. When the appropriate time came, I gladly handed him his towel and he emerged a moment later with it wrapped around his waist. I was very glad to be getting the chance to take a full shower. I didn’t really clean off too well at the compound because I knew we’d be getting obliterated with pies shortly after. Now, with plenty of both hot water and time, I got myself fully clean.

I didn’t want to take too long though, seeing as how Corporal Cook was waiting on us. While I didn’t know exactly what the present he had for us was, I did have a good idea. After toweling off, I went out and quickly put on my sweat pants and a t-shirt so Miles and I could go see our Fire Team Leader.

We were let into his room promptly after knocking. Miles and I were both pleased to see a keg sitting beside his fridge, which was confirmed to be our gift. Granted we would have to share with whatever other members of the platoon might swing by his room, which was a bit of relief. I didn’t think I could finish off half, or even a quarter of the keg and be really ready for work the next day. Not with all of the physical work we would be doing.

It was an enjoyable evening to say the least. Everyone in our platoon stopped by at one point or another to pay their respects to the fact we were brave enough to endure a crazy stunt like that. Some came for a quick beer and left while others stayed the evening and some just came and went. Naturally Miles and I were pretty much obligated to stay as long as other people were there, seeing as how we were the guests of honor and all.

There were a few good movies played for background noise and viewing, several card games, mostly poker, and mainly just good conversation. I got to know a good chunk of the platoon, even though I knew I’d wind up forgetting a lot of it after going to sleep. It’s amazing how beer can do that to you, isn’t it?

Later in the evening, as things were starting to wind down, I went outside and stood on the catwalk that surrounded our deck, or floor if you will. When I leaned on the railing I heard someone follow me out, quickly identifiable as Corporal Cook, who leaned on the rail next to me. I was glad he came out, there was something I’d been wanting to say to him. He started the conversation though.

“One hell of a day, huh?”

“Just from PT on,” I answered. “One afternoon I’ll sure as hell never forget.”

“I’ll never forget my initiation either. Taking more than fifty pies to virtually all of your visible body is something I think everyone would remember for quite some time. If they should ever forget, well, it’s a good thing we take pictures to remind them.”

“I’d rather not be reminded of you an Jerry violating my shorts like that.”

He chuckled and said, “Well, sorry about that. Sergeant Dennis had embarrassed both of us that way. We were just continuing the tradition.”

“And speaking of apologies,” I said in a more somber tone, “I’ve got one to make as well. I’m sorry I roughed you up so badly in the pit. I used way too much force than needed to and a lot more than I should have.”

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“Hey, no harm, no foul. I lived to wrestle again, that’s the important part.”

“But still, I feel guilty about it. I mean, when I choked you out, I kicked you as hard as I could in the back. That was an unprovoked action on a defenseless person and I feel like shit about it. The ‘Who’s my bitch’ comment with your little provoking gestures pissed me off. But hearing you scream when I kneed your balls, that just set me off. Something snapped inside my head and I could easily enough killed you out there. I couldn’t control myself and I can’t even tell you why I stopped to pin you when I did. I’ve never snapped in violence like that and it worries me, not only that did I do it, but I don’t really even remember what I did. Anyways, I’m sorry I beat you so badly.”

“No problem. And you didn’t beat me *that* badly.”

“No disrespect, Corporal, but I did hear you crying after I pinned you. That much I do remember.”

“You heard that,” he asked almost in shock.

“Loud and clear, Corporal.”

“If you tell anyone about that, you’re putting yourself in harms way.”

I couldn’t tell how serious he was with the intensity of the situation, but I knew before he said that it would be an incident that stayed with me to the grave.

“I give you my word on my life, Corporal, that it will forever stay between us.”

As an act of sincerity, I extended my hand, which he readily and firmly gripped. I truly was sorry that I’d hurt him that bad. I never meant to snap on him like that and I sure as hell didn’t mean to make him cry. Sure the knee to the nuts was intentional, being payback and all. We were supposed to take care of each other like friends, if not like brothers. I really did *not* mean to hurt him.

I did take it as a compliment to my fighting skills though. I think it said a lot that I was able to put a tough man with as much experience as him into tears. It’s just a too bad I felt like crap for it.

“I was kinda wondering why my back hurt,” he said after a moment of thought. “So you’re the kind that would hit someone when their back is turned, huh?”

“Only in an extreme case like that, Corporal, where I perceive a serious threat to myself or my friends. More so to my friends.”

“Someone who really looks out for people. At least for someone who earns your trust. I like that.”

“No one fucks with my friends and gets away with it Corporal. I will hit someone in the back if I perceive them as a threat to one of my friends.”

“Damn. Well, I’m glad you’re on my side.”

“Which is all fine and good until the next time we wrestle each other.”

“Believe me, I’m gonna bethinking twice about that. I think the next time I step into the ring with you will be when you’re my tag team partner.”

“Shit, that’d be cool as hell, you and me tag team against Miles and Jerry. Can we hook that up for PT on Friday Corporal?”

“I don’t see why not. It’ll give each of us a chance to recover from our matches of today. I’m sore as hell from my match against you and I know Jerry’s hurting from tangling with Miles and I’d think you two would be a little sore from wrestling each other.”

“Hell, Corporal, the worst I got was that nut shot you landed on me.”

“And that was just pure dumb luck.”

“It sure was. I can’t believe how unlucky I was in that one instant.”

“Yeah, shit happens. I’m just glad it took some of the force away from you. God only knows how badly I’d have gotten my ass kicked if I hadn’t bashed your balls.”

“I know it was a pretty low thing to do, but I think you can understand why I nailed you back.”

“Yeah,” he said. “One for one, it’s cool.”

I was glad he was taking it so good. I would have hated to have my new Fire Team Leader, someone I’d hardly known a full day now, pissed off at me because I’d kicked his ass putting out the fight I was supposed to. There was just one other thing I wanted to address.