

This story contains mature themes and situations. I guess this is where I say no one under 18 admitted without parent or guardian

The Worst Christian: Installment VI

The War Years

"I am simply amazed by how out of shape you are," Erin smiled smugly as he sucked deeply on his Korean cigarette. All I could think of was standing up and slapping that stupid grin off of his face. "I mean, how did you make it through boot camp?"

I was neatly folded over, hands on the knees of my dusty fatigues propping up my gasping frame. "Shut up and give me one of those," I said. Erin went to the pocket below the embroidered name "Pullhamus" and removed a half crumbled soft pack of 88's. They were at least a power of ten stronger than American cigarettes before the government outlawed nicotine. Over the years the gulf in cigarette potency had continued to widen to its present state of that between aspirin and morphine.

"Yeah, this should help." He tossed a cigarette at me. It bounced off my shoulder onto the dusty, bare ground. "Seriously though, how'd you make it through the last two missions alive?" He laughed, entirely amused by himself, and leaned back against the door frame.

I picked the cig off the ground, then sat on the barrack steps, where he joined me. "I'm in better shape than you, fuckhead," I said. He lit my smoke for me and we relaxed in the early afternoon sun.

Erin had removed his cap and was running his hand over his army short black hair. "That's only because you're always getting in trouble. If had to do half as many extra push-ups as you I'd be twice as buff as I already am." We laughed together, because it was true. When it came to extra duty I was king.

Large full clouds sailed peacefully overhead towards the mountains. Occasionally one would obscure the sun, casting a cool graying shadow across the world. When it moved on, the sun would flare back out, vividly igniting the dusty colors of the prefabricated base. It was a lazy day and everyone seemed to be milling about doing nothing in particular, even those doing some sort of duty. The grunts unloading a jeep into the mess hall across the compound seemed to be operating remotely, their minds elsewhere while they unloaded large boxes of freeze dried and powdered food stuffs that we would have to eat later.

It had been over a week since our last combat mission and even longer for some of the other soldiers. The distance from the base to The Line was enough that an attack was unlikely, and if it did happen we would have more than enough time to prepare. At this rate I might not have to kill too many more people.

"What are you thinking about?" Erin asked.

"Nothing."

"Well, quit it; thinking that shit will just get you killed later. It's us or them, and whether or not we buy that in the real world, we have to buy it here. You know I don't want to be here any more than you, but here we are. If you want to get home someday to that pretty little girl of yours, you have to make ol' Uncle Sam proud. It's that or end up like the guys in that Bradley."

"He's right, ya' pussy." The voice came from behind us - Knoll, as usual. We look up towards him, blinking at the bright blue sky above his head.

"You should listen to your faggot friend here," he said, gesturing at Erin. "I sure as hell don't wanna get whacked 'cause you fucked around about killing someone."

"Gee, Knoll, y'know, that's exactly what I was trying to tell him. Thanks for your empathy and keen feeling insights." Erin patronized. I attempted to stifle my laughter with moderate success.

"Fuck you, I don't need any crap from you shitheads." Knoll spit out venomously. "I wish they had never started the draft again"

"Well there's something I think we can all agree on." I interjected. "And frankly, I find that a bit frightening."

"Yeah, what do you have against the draft?" Erin asked as Knoll walked down the three steps to the worn dirt path at at our feet, before turning to look at us. Knoll asked for a cigarette - well, more ordered Erin to give him one - before answering.

"The problem with the draft is we get people like you two, as well as that Bradley driver. You don't want to be here, or you don't want to kill someone who'd smoke your ass in a heart beat, simply because you think killing's wrong."

"Volunteers like me," he said, adjusting his belt and resting one hand on the butt of his sidearm, "want to be here. We believe that we are fighting to preserve the American way of life. To protect civilians so that someday they can have all the benefits that we have. Ones draftees like you two seem to have grown complacent about."

"That's beautiful. You read that on the recruitment pamphlet?" I replied. Erin burst out laughing. Knoll on the other hand tightened his hand around his pistol grip. I figured he would never shoot me, asshole or not; we still wore the same uniform and you simply don't kill people on your side. Pistol whipping, or an equally good beating - that would be another story. I continued talking. "Humanitarian war, my ass. This has nothing to do with protecting the American way of life, or making a better way of life for the people that live around here. Hell, there isn't even a real concern for oil or anything tangible. If it was, we would have been here en masse forty years ago when these people started blowing each other to hell. "

"The U.N. was here," Erin stated, giving a wink and a nod to Knoll. Knoll flared his nostrils but nodded in agreement. I knew

it had to kill him to agree with Erin.

"Don't even get me started on the fuckin' U.N. League of Nations useless mothers. The US government wasn't even paying their dues at that point. The U.N. proved to be little more than demagoguery and bureaucracy. They provided human shields for any faction that found it convenient, which of course only forced the US's hand in this entire ordeal."

"Are you saying we should have just sat back and let the various factions of power use religious and historical claims to justify their 'ethnic' cleansings? I can't buy that for a second." Erin stared up, slack jawed at Knoll. Knoll hated Erin for being a fag and Erin hated Knoll for being a Neanderthal. There's was a long and bitter relationship dating back to the first days of boot camp.

Knoll ignored Erin and stood rubbing his wide, square jaw rethinking what he had just said, seeing if it held true or needed amending. Once he seemed satisfied that it was a stand-alone statement, he held the cigarette to his lips and inhaled. "No, we shouldn't have sat idle and let it happen."

I began again, "This area of the world has been a powder keg for centuries, if not millennia. The number of wars that have started here or were extensions of Balkan conflicts, or those associated with the surrounding area, are simply astounding. All this," I waved my hand to encompass the entire camp and surrounding mountains, "seems to be a result of disputes that were quelled by force when all these countries were Soviet Socialist Republics. When the U.S.S.R. collapsed under it's own bureaucracy, they were left alone to resume their internal hatreds, hatreds which had simply festered and multiplied during the seventy or so years of communist government."

Knoll went down into a squat so that the three of us were face to face. His hand went into the pocket under the U.S. Army label and pulled out a pack of black market cigarettes with a bad black and white copy of the Marlboro logo across the front. He offered Erin and I cigarettes, which we accepted, before lighting his own.

"I don't think that the blame for the start of these wars can be placed on the shoulders of the Soviets. They may have been the last century's evil, but most of us here weren't even alive when they collapsed. I know to me they're mostly just a footnote in history after the Second World War."

"Yeah." Erin seconded. I realized Erin and I had never discussed the topic any further than "This war sucks, I don't want to kill people." I now realized he hadn't a clue as to why the folks in D.C. had sent us all over here, or where this wave of blood and bodies that had reared up and begun roaring down from these green and gray foothills of peaceful stones and quiet pines had come from.

"No, no. I am not blaming the Soviets for anything like that," I began again. "Any trouble that the Soviets stirred up fell directly upon the Russians in the early years of their independence. Like the Georgian revolution, and all the

secessions. No, the fights here were started by the local governments over stupid shit like religious beliefs and petty political squabbling. 'We claim this land in the name of Whothefuck. Get out, or get offed.'

"I digress. The Soviets merely postponed these problems, the way they only repressed the Nazis in East Germany, which explains what is going on over there." Erin and Knoll nodded knowingly. Even with the relatively sanitized news the Army fed us it was evident that Germany was about to explode and take as many of its neighbors along as it could.

My vision of the future of Europe was war, war unlike the continent spanning front line that existed in the Second World War. This would be a future of local phosphorous fires. No simple front line to push back to a capital that we would then destroy and claim victory over, claim that peace and righteousness had triumphed. No, this time pockets of war would start and tear apart small collections of nations.

The United States of America would soon be forced out of its role as global firefighter and cop, much to the pleasure of many countries to be sure. The new role of the American army would be straight out defense of national interests. This would come as a result of American families being sick of watching their sons, daughters, brothers and sisters being drafted to be killed in some forsaken and unpronounceable country whose government happens to hate its populace. Much like the nineteen forties, the Stalins of the world would once again be able to murder and pillage their own people. Especially after this last round of drafts, it would now take something the magnitude of Hitler to get the American populace to endorse another round.

The standing army would find itself anywhere money was at stake. Human lives would be removed from the equation. The farce of U.N. peacekeeping would be swept away and the honesty of blood for oil would fill every body bag sent home to Mom and Dad in the suburbs.

I tried to explain my point of view to Knoll. From the way his face twisted up in disgust I could tell my hatred for the pistol on my hip had tainted my opinion beyond his limits of acceptability.

"Basically you're saying that the U.S. military is becoming rent-a-cops for rich nations. Fuck that." Patrick Knoll was obviously not the first Knoll in the armed forces. Judging by his jingoistic convictions I had to guess it went back to at least his grandfather or grandmother, and probably further.

"Hey, wanna go check out the new Bradley?" Erin interrupted, lightening the mounting tension between Knoll and myself at least a notch.

Knoll's eyes perked up a bit. "Fuck, I almost forgot about that."

Erin and I stood, dusting ourselves off a bit, before lighting up fresh cigarettes. As we walked across the camp I attempted to moderate my argument a little.

"No, I don't think the American military will become a pawn to rich countries," I pronounced to Koll. Any more than it already is, I thought to myself.

"But think about it. Most of the countries where the Army has been sent haven't wanted the US's help. By forcing our military peacekeeping upon them we are no better than the fascists who preceded us. Not only do we not have the popular support needed to be effective, we're making our allies edgy. Most of the old industrialized nations cannot support the massive war efforts of the last century."

Knoll was mulling this over as we came to the waist high fence that bordered this section of the landing strip. Across the tarmac sat a huge C-class plane. The back ramp had already been lowered by our arrival and the crew was busy coming in and out of the plane, probably freeing up the final restraints and straps that kept the cargo from shifting too much during flight.

"I mean, look at America. We're having a bitch of a time meeting the deadlines for the emissions reduction pact. Using what resources are allotted to crank out more of these," I said, pointing to the massive squat cargo plane, "can't be helping. Imagine if we could turn all those factories over to the production of retail goods. Might really help the economy out of it's slump."

Knoll grunted something vaguely affirmative in my direction. He was leaning forward with his hands on the top rail of the chain link fence, squinting in the direction of the plane, studying it. Similarly, around the perimeter of the tarmac and adjacent hangar, others sat and stood watching the plane. Waiting, not intently. Being there for lack of anything much more exciting for the moment.

"What kind of plane is that?" Erin asked me from the far side of Knoll.

"Hercules." Knoll answered, to both of our surprise. "Fuckin' series has been around forever and it just gets better every make."

He glanced at Erin to make sure he was paying attention and then began pointing out an infinite number of minutiae that made this series different from its predecessors. Erin shook off his surprise; this was probably the first time, outside of military protocol, that Knoll had spoken civilly to Erin.

Unlike most people with same sex inclinations in the armed forces, Erin did not hide his persuasion. As a direct result, he had very few comrades, and even fewer friends. Most of the other pinks hid the fact that they were gay to keep from getting too many overly dangerous missions or back barrack beatings, which, while uncommon, were certainly not unheard of.

Erin had come into the forces from New York City. While he knew of discrimination, prejudice, and fag bashing, he was also accustomed to a large degree of support from the gay/lesbian community. But in the forces there were just a few unofficial and semi official

support groups. They had started up once the "Don't ask, don't tell." policy had been expanded to full integration regardless of sexual orientation. Erin belonged to at least two of these. As for the official support groups, no one who wanted a distinguished career, or even just an unblemished one, went to those for help.

We met during basic training. He was sitting by himself in the mess. My views about politics and the war had made me somewhat unpopular in my barracks so I joined him at the end of one of the long plastic laminate wood grain topped tables. One artist, one writer, neither of whom wanted to be where they were. This was the stuff of lasting relationships. It had not taken long after we began hanging out for others to start calling me a fag, and other oh so creative terms they could come up with.

Basic training is hard.

The stress of the training regimens and practice can be severe. It was somewhere between field stripping rifles and trudging through chest deep muck, holding our rifles over our heads, that we found we needed more comfort than simple friendship allowed, and we let ourselves have it. Nothing is more terrifying than the thought of dying alone.

I thought of the picture in my breast pocket, pressed against my chest by a compass my father had given to me before I shipped out. The picture of my beloved Karen. I didn't have to take the picture out as often as I sometimes had when I first came in, for now I knew every detail on its surface. At times I swear I could just think about it and picture the photo in my mind, with her sitting there on the hood of her Honda in the snow, smiling as bright as tomorrow. The picture had managed to capture the crazy lustre in her eye that she got when she was insanely proud of herself for having done something insanely dumb. The picture had actually been taken about six months before we met. Her hair was a bright red at the time and came down just past her shoulders, wrapping in girlish curls under her chin. I thought about her eyes and smile and tried to feel better. While people in the unit might not understand about Erin and I, she would. But I knew I could never ask her to, like I had never asked her to wait for me to return.

But how I prayed every night that she would. That when I got back from my tour I would see that face, those eyes and that smile waiting for me at the end of the disembarkment ramp. Lord, please let her be there, to remember how much I cared about her, if not in the things I said then in the things I did. Some days it all seems like too much. Knowing we could be sent on a mission at any time, that any mission could be my last.

God, I know prayer is not really supposed to be about asking for things, but more about praising your works and searching for understanding. I witness the beauty of your world every day. In the rugged terrain as I march, in the laughter of my comrades in the face of desperation, in these things I see hope. Still I know that it is likely as not, that I could be killed out among your wonders. Killed by someone as reluctant to kill as myself.

I just want to ask you one thing. If it does happen, please look after Karen, please be with her and guide her, let her know I

loved her. Please...

"Here it comes," Erin broke into my thoughts, pointing to the ramp with his cigarette.

The front two legs of the Bradley began creeping out on the balls located in the base of each foot. Coming into the day, the mottled camouflage made the machine look like a spider stirring from its den on one of the nature shows I watched as a child. Standing there with its two front legs at the base of the ramp and its center legs curled underneath it, I could not help but imagine it waiting for a fat, juicy cricket, or technician in this case, to blunder by. I was so fixated on this image that I was shocked when it merely rolled forward down the ramp, instead of pouncing on and devouring the soldier waving it forward.

"Where's the troop carrier?" Erin asked Knoll.

"They stack them in the front end of the plane during shipping. It makes loading and unloading the Bradleys easier. That, and if one of the Bradleys were to come loose during transport, the carriers would keep it from sliding forward and crushing the cockpit." Erin grunted an acknowledgement, apparently thinking about Knoll's little mental picture.

Meanwhile, the Bradley had lowered the middle auxiliary legs and stood, seemingly immovable, in the middle of the tarmac, running through some post flight checks. It looked lean and sleek, like the new "Powell" tanks. Tomorrow morning it would look full and fat with a troop carrier clamped to its underside, between its legs. In its Chaubum II insides we would sit like the Greeks entering Troy, waiting for the cover of night to spring forth and slaughter the natives in their sleep - or something like that, anyway.

"That things a fuckin' monster." I said.

"Yeah," Knoll agreed. "Ain't she beautiful?"
