

“You’re not really the talkative type, are you?” the driver asked as he and his passenger made their way into the heart of the small city in front of them. Arrochar was a military town sitting just outside of the small base Fort Wadsworth on Staten Island and they were heading straight downtown.

The passenger was engrossed in the piece of paper he’d been staring at off and on since the pair had left the airport. “Sorry, just thinking,” he replied as he glanced up to take in his surroundings. “Aren’t we going to Fort Wadsworth?”

“Nope,” the driver said as he casually stroked his mustache. “We’re heading into town. Not much longer now.”

“This is all starting to feel a little bit weird, ummm, Sergeant?” he guessed, hoping not to lowball the other man’s rank.

The driver shook his head. “I told you, call me Wood, and don’t worry about it. Things will make sense soon enough.”

Sensing there were no other answers forthcoming, the passenger turned his attention back to the paper in his hand. He’d been called into his company commander’s office two days ago and told he’d received orders to go TDY¹ to the U.S. Army Chaplain Assistant’s School at Fort Wadsworth. The orders were sealed, marked for his eyes only, and had included a ticket on a civilian flight, instructions to travel in civilian clothes, and an ominous warning about the potential for the orders to become permanent. He’d dutifully packed his bags, said a brief goodbye to his few friendly acquaintances, and less than 48 hours later found himself deplaning in La Guardia. As he walked to the baggage claim, uncertain of what he was supposed to be doing from here, he’d found a man with a sign waiting for him. He’d introduced himself simply as Wood, led him to a non-descript gray SUV, and set off. The driver was friendly and talkative but hadn’t offered much in the way of details about what was happening.

¹ Temporary Duty Assignment

“Hey, man...take a look over there,” the driver instructed, shaking him out of his reminiscence.

“Look at what?” the passenger said as he raised his head. They’d entered the city at some point and were now sitting at the entrance to a parking garage. He squinted at the dark ramp ahead, made even more so by the brightness of the afternoon sun above them, and faintly made out the red power light of a security camera. A moment after he did so the gate in front of them silently rose to grant admission. The driver pulled into the garage just a short distance before pulling into a parking spot marked reserved.

“Alright, man. We’re here. Come with me and I’ll take you up.”

The passenger didn’t respond but just silently exited the vehicle. Something about the situation was unsettling, but he followed the driver through the empty garage and into a waiting elevator. The other man pushed a button and the car lurched into motion.

“Take a breath, man. You look like you’re about to freak out. There really ain’t nothing to worry about...Alan was it? Sorry, I’m not great with names.”

“Yeah, Alan...or Specialist Hendrick if you want.”

“Sorry, I’m not big on titles. None of us really are, but you’ll figure us out soon enough.”

Alan raised an eyebrow, “Who’s us?”

The elevator announced their arrival at the destination floor with a sharp *ding*. “You’ll see in a few seconds.”

Wood led the way down the unadorned hallway outside and Alan quietly followed. After a couple minutes of walking and some turns that took them deeper into the building he finally paused outside of an unlabeled door. Knocking sharply a few times, Wood opened in and led them in without waiting for a response.

“Hey everyone, I brought Hendrick. Need anything else?” Wood asked.

Alan glimpsed around the room and saw six unfamiliar faces seated around a conference table in its center. Five men and a woman in regular civilian clothes glanced his way, and he could feel the intensity of their casual scrutiny in the most primal part of his brain.

“No thanks, Crankcase. We’ll take him from here,” the man at the head of the table replied.

Wood...or Crankcase was it? Alan asked himself, poured a cup of coffee from the carafe on the table and nodded.

“He’s all yours,” was his only response as he turned and stepped out, closing the door behind himself.

“How was your flight, Specialist?” the man who’d addressed the driver asked.

“It was fine, thank you...uh, sir?” Alan said questioningly.

The other man stood, and the others in the room did likewise.

“I suppose some introduction and explanations are in order,” the other man said as he approached with his hand extended. “I’m General Clayton Abernathy.”

Alan immediately felt his spine subconsciously stiffen as he snapped to attention.

“Sir!” he squeaked, his voice cracking at the unexpected situation he suddenly found himself in.

“I told you, Hawk. You owe me a cup of coffee,” one of the other men in the room said.

“That was a sucker’s bet,” the woman replied. “Same thing happens every time.”

“Even when all of you were standing where he is if I remember correctly,” the General said without breaking eye contact with Alan. “At ease, son. No need for formality here.”

Fighting against every instinct the Army had instilled in him, Alan forced himself to relax somewhat and tentatively grasped the other man’s hand.

“See, just another person,” Hawk said as they shook. Breaking contact he turned to the others in the room and motioned to each in turn. “Let me introduce you to the rest of the room.

These guys are my XO², Chief Warrant Officer Fairborne, First Sergeant Hauser, Sergeant Major Sneedden, Lieutenant Rich, and the lady here is Sergeant Hart-Burnett.”

He shook each hand in turn, awkwardly mumbling greetings as he uncomfortably realized how significantly everyone in the room outranked him.

“Have a seat, Specialist,” the General said as the rest of the room returned to their own chairs. Hesitantly he did as he was told, flexing his sweaty hands as the other occupants locked him in gazes of varying degrees of intensity. “We’ve been reading your blog. You’ve got quite the handle on military history.”

Alan swallowed a sudden lump in his throat, forcing himself to croak out a response. “I verified that I wasn’t posting anything classified,” he said feebly, certain that these people were about to destroy his career for some unintentional breach he’d committed.

The General waved his hand in a calming gesture. “I’m sure you did. I can assure you that you’re not in trouble. In fact, your attention to detail and depth of knowledge in the subject are why you’re here. We wanted to talk to you about how you collect your information. I see you have a degree in military history?”

“Yes sir, I do.”

“Is that why you enlisted as a records specialist, so that you’d have access to this sort of information?” the man who’d been introduced as a Sergeant Major asked.

“Umm...” he stammered, “not exactly. I just like research and paperwork, and I joined because there weren’t a lot of other places looking to hire someone with a degree like mine.”

“So, what are you going to do after your enlistment? Take your G.I. Bill and try to find someone that is?”

“To be honest, Sergeant Major, I don’t know. I may make a career out of the Army.”

“You could try to get work at a base museum if you’re that interested in history.”

² Executive Officer

“That would be great, but there aren’t a lot of those jobs out there.”

“What if we had a job for you?” the Warrant Officer asked.

Alan shifted his attention to the man’s friendly, open expression and found himself unconsciously set slightly more at ease. “That would depend on the job, Sir.”

“Pretty much what you’re already doing for fun, but you’d do it for us,” he replied.

“Well then I supposed that would also depend on who exactly us is…”

“That’s the thing,” the First Sergeant added. “You won’t know until you take the job.”

“That’s right,” General Abernathy continued. “This is an interview for a job you may have already got. All you have to do is accept it to find out what it is.”

Everyone around the table chuckled at this, but Alan didn’t see the joke. Instead, his mind started churning, trying to figure out exactly what they were talking about. “I’m not sure I’m comfortable with that, Sir.”

“I don’t blame you, son. What we can tell you is that if you take the job, it will be the most fulfilling one you ever have. I can promise you the chance to use all your skills and exercise all of your interests, but it comes with some sacrifices too. I understand that’s not a lot to go on, but the opportunity that we’re presenting is a leap of faith. If we present it that is.” As the General finished speaking the Sergeant Major stood. He briefly nodded in Abernathy’s direction before turning to Alan.

“Come with me, Specialist,” he said as he strode by and exited the room. Sneed led the way directly across the hall and motioned him into another room across from them. This one was empty except for a couch against one wall. “Have a seat,” he said, motioning toward the sofa, “and think about what we said.” Without another word he’d turned around and closed the door behind him.

“What *did* you say?” Alan asked, confused, to the now empty room.

“Well, what’s everyone think?” Hawk asked the others as Sneedden walked back into the room. “Psyche-Out?”

The man introduced as Lieutenant Rich wrapped his knuckles on the table. “He’s a smart kid. He spent the whole time he was in here trying to figure out what we were up to, and his body language suggested he was open to what we were offering. He definitely has some solid military drilled into him, but it doesn’t define him. I don’t think he’s satisfied with where he’s at, and we’re enough to intrigue him. That’s just a first impression though, I definitely can’t give you a full profile from reading a dossier and a five-minute chat.”

“You say that every time we do this, Psyche, but you haven’t been wrong yet,” Flint reassured the man.

“It helps that they never make it this far unless we’re pretty sure already,” Psyche-Out scoffed before turning back to Hawk. “He’s naturally curious too, so that’s probably got him hooked even if nothing else does.”

“Just like we were hoping,” Hawk continued. “What are your thoughts, Jaye?”

“He’s sincere,” the woman answered in a slightly husky voice. “His concerns were genuine, and all the background checks we ran on him came back clear. When I talked to the other members of his unit, they all said the same thing. Hard working, not overly social, and seemingly bored in the office. Nothing about the interview to suggest otherwise, so I’d call him a good fit.”

“Works for me. Flint, Duke, Beachhead.....any concerns about him?”

“Smart guy. I think he’ll do just fine,” Flint replied.

“Same here. I get a good feeling from him,” Duke added.

“He could benefit from some more PT³, but I think he’ll work for what we need him for,” Beachhead finished.

³ Physical Training

"I agree," Hawk concluded. "Let's make him an offer."

The door opened and startled Alan from his contemplations. Alan glanced at the clock and was shocked to realize it had only been about five minutes.

"We're ready for you. Come on back."

"Yes, Sergeant Major," Alan said as he shot to his feet.

The other man scoffed slightly and led the way back to the conference room. Alan followed him in and retook the seat the other man motioned to as he passed.

"Congratulations, Specialist. You've made the grade. We're offering you a position with us," Hawk announced with a smile. "We just need your answer. You can accept and join us, or you can return to your unit and this interview never happened."

Alan was immediately taken aback. He hadn't expected to be offered a new job when he got off the plane earlier, especially not this quickly, and he especially wasn't expecting to have to reply so suddenly. Confused and looking for a sign he scanned the faces around the table. They gave away nothing...nothing but confidence, strength, and a sense of certainty. It was contagious, and Alan found himself hypnotized by how sure and resolute the people surrounding him were. Quietly, and as if without any conscious effort on his part, Alan heard himself respond. "I accept," he said, surprised by the steadiness of his own voice.

"Happy to hear it," Hawk said as he and the others stood. His face broke into a broad smile as he walked around the table and clapped Alan on the shoulder, the rest of them doing likewise and offering a variety of smiles and handshakes. "Welcome to G.I. Joe."

"G.I. Joe?" Alan replied incredulously.

"That's what the man said," Duke replied. "We don't have a unit designation or insignia or anything else your regular unit has. We're just a random bunch of generic Joes."

"How does someone get assigned to a unit that doesn't exist?"

Lady Jaye leaned forward and rested her elbows on the table. "It's a shell game. You're going to stay assigned to your initial unit on paper, but you'll be on a steady stream of orders upon orders in an unending trail that eventually leads to a dead end if anyone takes the time to follow the trail."

"Don't worry, you'll have plenty of time to figure it out in your new position," Flint assured him. "Which I'm sure you're wondering about."

"Yes sir."

"I'll go ahead and finish explaining it. You can all go ahead and get back to whatever you all had going on today," Hawk said to the room at large. The other five around the table each stood and took turns congratulating the new Joe as they all filed out of the room. Shortly, Alan found himself alone at the table with the General.

"Before we talk about what you'll be doing here, let me give you a quick primer on being a Joe. We don't use ranks or titles here, and we don't use names. Not outside of this room at least. Today was the last time you'll hear or use either of them. Instead, you're expected to simply recognize the chain of command, which is fairly loose as you'll be allowed significant autonomy, and you'll refer to your fellow Joes by their codenames."

"Codenames, sir?"

"You need to break that habit fast because we just talked about titles. But yes, codenames. Every Joe has one. Mine is Hawk, which you may have heard some of the others use."

Alan thought back to the whirlwind meeting and realized that he did in fact hear the woman use that name. "Oh, yes, si.....umm, yes, I think I did."

"Good. The others in the room were Duke, Flint, Beachhead, Lady Jaye, and Psyche-Out," Hawk listed as he pointed to the vacated chairs. "Your codename is Scribe."

"Scribe? As in someone that copies documents?"

“More as in a record keeper since that’s what you’ll be doing here. We may be a covert unit, and we may keep thorough mission logs, but we don’t have much of a unit history. That’s especially true for our non-combatant members. But the men and women of this organization deserve to be remembered and deserve to be able to look on their achievements with pride, even if just amongst themselves.”

Alan, or Scribe now he realized, nodded slowly. “I think I understand. You want me to collect and record the rest of the story.”

“Not just record it. I want a complete record of every Joe, what they do, and the contributions they’ve made. We may not be a unit in the traditional sense, but we certainly are in a very real sense, so I want a full chronicle and potentially a museum of Joe history. You’re going to put that together for us. Feel free to take a couple of days to settle in and familiarize yourself with the facility, meet some of your new teammates, and put together a plan for how you want to approach this task. After that you’ll have unrestricted access to any personnel you want to talk to.”

“There aren’t any need to know restrictions, si....Hawk?”

“Psyche-Out was right, you really are a fast learner. But no, there won’t be any restrictions. You’re a Joe now, just like the rest of us. We’re all equal here. Same level of trust, same level of access. That’s the only way an organization like ours works, which you’ll figure out soon enough.” Hawk reached out to the phone on the table in front of him and hit a button. “Come get him for the nickel tour.”

The door opened almost immediately and a man about the same age as Scribe walked in.

“Just the nickel tour?” he asked as he looked the new arrival over.

“Well, you’re the money man, Paycheck, so as much as you want to spend.” Hawk stood and Scribe followed suit.

“No problem, I’ll make sure he gets the lay of the land and settles in.”

“Good, he’s got work to get to.” Hawk walked up and shook hands with the new recruit once more. “If you need anything my door’s always open, and I want you to check in every week or so to let me know how things are going.”

Scribe nodded, but before he could reply Hawk was heading for the door.

“All right, new guy. I’ve got some paperwork I need you to do and then we’ll see about getting you set-up with a spot of your own. Follow me down the rabbit hole, Alice.”

The other man led the way out the door before Scribe could ask what that meant, and all he could do was follow close behind.