

## The Second Civil War

I can't say who struck first. Some say the first salvo was the presidential assassination. Others claim the Chicago massacre last July. Censorship and corrupt law made it near impossible to discern who was actually at fault. Loopholes and the restriction of First Amendment Rights did not allow for a public investigation. All I know is the cataclysmic civil war that erupted across America stunned the world. Americans were not as surprised. The elderly, more venerable Americans were touted as paranoid for spending decades prophesying the ultimate collapse of our republic. Most Millennium Babies, like my parents, had grown up in the turmoil indifferent to the day our nation fell into darkness. And every single one of my peers was forced to fight, literally, for an outdated system that imploded over our heads. Three years ago President Bane reinstated the draft, for all able bodies over seventeen to help quell the faction uprising. Some speculate that may have led to his death.

That brings me to where I am now. Trapped beneath the rubble of some convenience store my unit was holed up in. We had been called upon by the feds to protect the country's most valuable cities from the extremist uprisings. The action in the south was far less violent than it was here in the north. Such would be expected of the blue-bloods. Making their stronghold in New York City, the incompetent asses would threaten their enemies with extravagant claims, most of which they never enacted. On the other hand, the far more militant faction from Dallas never forgave and never forgot the petty threats. In turn they brought their strong will and endless arsenal straight to their enemy's doorstep. For several months we have been pushing the Packs (as they are affectionately called) west into Pennsylvania. The birds came in hot. That's the last thing I remember. It seemed like the perfect irony that I should wake up to realize we're in Gettysburg. Did I mention my name is Washington?

“Sergeant Jones?” I coughed, hoping the call would locate my ranking officer. Light streamed between disintegrated concrete and twisted rebar, illuminating the dust disturbed by my shouts. The bulk of the building had fortunately fallen to either side of me, and only the dilapidated roof held me down.

“Is that you, Washington?” another voice asked, one of my fellow privates, Lucas Donahue. He was from Boston and spoke with a thick Southie accent. I saw movement from behind a crumpled aisle stand.

“Yeah, Donnie, you hurt?”

Frantically, he replied, “Wilson’s dead. Fernandez too!”

“Damnit,” I muttered, “Any eyes on Sarge?”

A raspy voice from above me called out, distinctly the Sergeant. He must have slunk under cover of the tank outside before the blitz and been scrounging the wreckage for his troops. “Delta team!” he yelled.

Donahue and I hollered at the top of our lungs to catch his attention. But suddenly, the muffled ricochet of gunfire sounded outside, cutting his sentence apart. A thump landed directly above me. Smashing through the flimsy shingles, the impression of the Sergeant indented the roof above. In a unit made up entirely of drafted teenagers, most of whom were likely dead from the bombing, we now lacked leadership and direction. My heart went into overdrive, pounding through my ribs and coursing adrenaline into my veins as I silenced my breath upon hearing unknown footsteps cross the roof.

“This one’s fubar, now. Whoa, hang on—he’s a Jenny!”

The Sergeant never made it a secret he sided with the blue-bloods (nicknamed Jennys), after all that’s why he served to protect NYC. On his left shoulder he had an iron-on patch of the

signifying crest. In fact, most of us were sympathetic to them given our hometown origins in the North. Abigail Browning was the only one of us from below the Mason-Dixon Line. And even she had a soft spot for the blues. The intention of recruiting the youth was to abolish this partisan manner of belief. I like to think I'm impartial, holding fast to the neutral ideals of the white stripes down the sides of my uniform, but I suppose in war it comes down to your side and the enemy's. And right now the Scarlets had not only decimated my unit, but stood above me with all the power. In addition, the Sergeant's declaration of sides surely wouldn't pan out well for us. Someone in the unit moaned with pain at the most inopportune time, writhing within the destroyed building that shifted material enough to catch a Scarlet's attention. Without warning, they opened fire.

I cowered into a ball, tucking my limbs together to avoid any stray bullets. Donahue however returned fire, having access to his weapon unlike myself. His attempts to ward off the offensive were futile, since he couldn't tell where the oncoming fire came from. I didn't know at first if Donahue knew to play dead or if he had actually been killed, but once the firing ceased, I cupped my hands over my mouth to silence any whimpering and heard nothing from his direction. I was terrified, unarmed and trapped; I don't know if it could have been any worse. "No way those Jennys survived that," one man boasted from the exterior of the rubble.

"We have to move on, hot spots at our nine o' clock, men," announced someone with authority. "These blues are dead." The footfalls clopped across the roof as they faded off the structure and back into the street. In silence I waited for some hint of safety. Several arduous minutes passed.

"Washington, you dead?" Donahue asked timidly with strain.

A wave of relief washed over me. I wasn't alone. "Negative," I systematically responded. Whatever spatter came my way must have lodged in the Sergeant's body. Even in death he was sacrificing himself for us.

"Think the Packs are gone?"

"I don't know. Do you have a visual?"

"Nothing but steel and concrete."

I could barely see an image of the street through the scattered bullet holes strewn across the roof. Aside from the damaged buildings nearby, I had no sight of any hostiles. Even if it was dangerous, we had to liberate ourselves from the calamitous prison. "Can you get out?" I inquired, hoping Donahue had better access to escape than I did.

"Way ahead of you," he affirmed. Boxes and bottles crashed onto the ground with his motions to free himself from the collapse. I couldn't see beyond a thick cloud of dust, but I could hear him break free of the building and cross the roof. He cursed at the sight of our officer, but as I told him, he was right where he needed to be to get me out. Donahue moved the Sarge's body and tore through the softened roof with a long knife, cutting a hole big enough for me to crawl through. I was never happier to see that conceited man's face. It was covered in dirt and blood, much like my own. Remerging from the rubble was like being born into an entirely new world. The quaint town flanked by preserved fields was completely obliterated. Homes and stores were flattened and the elegant countryside was aflame sending the musk of death and smoke into the air. Cars and bodies were everywhere, forgotten much like the fallen from the town's previous battle. Units of draftees lay in the street under debris. And our tank was decisively defaced with the red spray-paint tag of the Packs emblem.

“So much for the land of the free and the home of the brave,” I muttered, my thoughts focused on the unspeakable tragedy before us.

“God Bless America,” Donahue said, his words resonating over the hallowed ground.

Replacing my broken weapon was simple with the amount of casualties along the roadway; the scattered bodies were stockpiled with guns and ammunition. Staying alone on the street was the most dangerous game we could have played. We had to reconnect with another unit. My first thought was that there could be friendlies in the disheveled colonial houses, once preserved as a reminder of our past, now a cruel definition of the future. Donahue covered my six as I gathered the necessary gear. The body I looted could not have been a day older than myself. His face was smooth save a few blemishes, frozen with the surprised expression when his gut was blown apart. His knife was sharper than mine, and it’s not as if he’d need it. So I took that too. Cautiously, Donahue and I viewed the Packs vacating the town pressing further east, their red flags rippling as the tanks bowled over the surrounding hills.

“Take cover,” I shouted, having spotted our planes rocketing low over the terrain, returning the unwarranted bombing atop the Packs’ central units. We ducked beside a topsyturvy automobile, holding our position until a wedge of fighter jets had passed over, ensuring that if they were tailed, we weren’t seen. Under a mile out, the crossfire between tanks and jets became heated with surface-to-air missiles and napalm laced bombs splattering over the Packs.

The only safe structure around was a colonial home down the road, half its roof blasted off by a premature explosion. If anyone else was alive in the town, that’s where they would be. “We should check in there,” I recommended, standing behind the car as I scanned the area through the sight of my newly acquired M16. My vision was clear; there wasn’t a single movement besides Donahue fidgeting with his helmet by my knee.

“Team Romeo went in there last,” said Donahue as he laid his weapon over the undercarriage of the car giving the hills beyond the home a thorough sweep. “Came out just before the blast.”

“Rest of ‘em might be keeping shelter,” I responded, “But if it’s a trap?”

With a wry smirk, Donahue replied, “That’s what we’ve got guns for.”

Donahue departed from the safety of the car first. He pranced into the street, swiveling on his toes in every direction, keeping himself covered at any angle. Nearly across the road, he waved me on. I followed his example, pivoting my feet as I crossed to keep a panoramic view of the area. Smoke from the town in one direction and bomb blasts and jet zips in another; thudding of tanks rolled over the hills as we rejoined at the shoulder. Our weapons propped in opposite directions, we approached the panel door flicking our heads like a sprinkler. Clear. I tried the knob. It swung open at the faintest touch, creaking agape to reveal what once had been a café. The tiny round tables were benched by tiny round seats. And behind the granite counter were various squealing coffee, latte and espresso machines.

A shuffling noise redirected our sights across the renovated first floor. Where walls once stood, the open café was situated around the home’s central staircase. Donahue nodded me off to our left. He took the right. Creeping by the tables, I made my way to the stairs where I had to crane my neck around the corner to make a quick scan. The tousled room stuffed with seating and a burnt out fireplace on the far wall paled in comparison to the bodies of Team Romeo I saw sprawled across the hardwood.

The crackling vibe of a radio call trickled through the stuffy air to and perked our ears. Donahue and I rushed to the fallen female soldier, tearing the device off her belt. I twisted the knob, surfing channels as Donahue rolled the woman over to remove the battery pack from her

back. With any luck we could receive orders from the base. Suddenly, my attention was drawn from the static radio to the fallen combatant twitching at the dead draftee's side. I instantly recognized the all-too-familiar forest green fatigues of the Packs, the trademark emblem sewn into the back of the man's uniform. He looked to be injured. A shot to the thigh. With precision, Donahue and I twisted our bodies to direct our guns at the token enemy.

"I'm unarmed!" quickly pleaded the Scarlet, throwing his hands into the air. He was weaponless as he claimed, easily six feet tall, two-fifty, with metals pinned to his chest and shivering at the site of two scrawny draftees.

"On your feet, Pack," Donahue demanded callously.

"I can't," was the man's reply. "My leg's bunk."

"Does it look like I give a damn? Get up!" Donahue shouted, edging his weapon closer.

"What're you doing here?" I roughly interjected over the static of the radio. "Your people have moved on."

"They left me," he replied dejected. Heaving himself against the brick wall, he grasped at his leg, prompting the two of us to cock our weapons. "Just go," he exclaimed with anguish.

Imploring for more information, I asked, 'why' but his lips sealed as he gave us the once-over. Perhaps determining now that he could overpower us even with his bum leg, or maybe he saw something in us that I saw in him at that moment. His eyes were glazed, peering back and forth between his own body and ours. Each covered in the same color uniform, with slightly different insignias. Our white stripes denoting the federal national guard, and his tinted red around the cuffs to mark the Scarlet pride. A thought blasted through my mind that had never once before crept in. It must have been the fear on his face, but I realized he was just as nervous to lose his life and never see his family again as much as Donahue and I were. I saw it more

often as a passing glint in the corner of Donahue's gaze, but it was the same expression this abandoned Pack was showing us now.

Suddenly, Donahue snarled, "Kiss your ass goodbye," clearly not having seen the same thing I had as he lifted his gun. The man shouted, scrunching his head into his neck and squishing his eyes, reaching out a hand towards the female draftee; Donahue aimed, but I knocked into his side, sending the shot into the wall.

"What the hell, Washington!"

"He's not a threat," I barked, frustrated that Donahue couldn't see the man's remorse.

"What're you yelling about?" Donahue responded sarcastically, turning his attention back to the Pack, the barrel of his gun promptly aimed.

"My sister," muttering, the man abruptly explained, locking eyes with the female they stole the radio from. "She was killed by my unit. Please let me live." He caressed her cropped hair as she stared blankly at the ceiling beside him, blood turning her federal fatigues crimson.

"Sister?" Donnie echoed.

"She's a draftee? Shouldn't she be a Pack?" I wondered since alliances ran in families, speaking over Donahue's muttered indifference.

"We never agreed. But she was my family. And they killed her. I pleaded and they shot me," stuttered the man, clinging to his lifeless sibling in spite of the torment on his face prompted by his femoral injury.

A moment of silence engulfed the café as the radio static cleared. With his stubby nose upturned, Donahue scoffed, "Typical Packs. So, are we killing him or not?"

"Negative," I replied shortly. "We need to bring him back to the base." I pressed my ear against the radio receiver, listening intently for any scattered piece of information.

“Without a convoy? As a P.O.W.? We won’t get ten yards before getting into Charlie Foxtrot.”

Allowing both the injured man and Donahue to understand my intentions I said freely, “We’ll help you out. What’s your name?”

“Bill Wright.”

Donahue groaned and responded, “This is a complete snafu, Washington. Every squad in our company has gone Elvis and you want us to march back to the camp with a Pack thinking nothing will happen?”

Before I replied, I caught a few disconnected words from the static. “I don’t care if you don’t like the idea, Donnie. We don’t choose sides, remember? We protect the country. And if he protected one of us then we should protect him.”

“He chose a side!”

“Then stay here and stand down,” I growled, offering a hand-up for Wright.

“I am not traveling with a Scarlet!”

“I don’t love it either, but he’s an American fighting for his beliefs just like us.”

“Beliefs we don’t hold.”

“You’re right. We don’t bleed blue or have scarlet hearts. But I know a day will come again when our flag is one. Red, White and Blue.” I struggled to haul up Wright’s limp side. The static began calling us back, declaring the all-clear. The only way we could leave the building was with Donahue holding up the rest of Wright’s weight. United we could stand the fight back to base.