

## TOY SOLDIERS

December 28, 2069

Austin, Texas

Max knew that there was a high chance he was going to die.

“If you move, I’ll shoot,” the voice before him said, sounding like tyres on a gravelly road – rough and torn from the civil war that had plagued the nation for many years.

Max resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

With the gun still trained on Max, the man leaned down and used his free hand to rip Max’s backpack away. The man unzipped it and peered inside – there were bottles of mineral water, rolls of toilet paper, and several tins of canned food. Max sighed.

He should have known better than to wander the streets alone at night, but there was no choice. Supplies were running low, and Max had passed through a lonely, abandoned grocery store in a street corner barely noticeable to the outside world. The others, instead, were out raiding for medical supplies.

Now Max was going to go back empty-handed. Great. Or he was probably going to die, because the robber’s trigger-finger was twitching – which meant Max was going to have his insides blasted on the pavement like one of those squashed oranges in a wet market.

“If you shoot him, I’ll shoot you.”

Max gaped at the newcomer – a tall, wiry man who had miraculously appeared out of the middle of nowhere, gun aimed at the robber’s head. *Holy shit, talk about coincidence and luck.* This man was in some sort of uniform, appearing to be exceptionally clean under the moon’s faint glow.

“Leave,” the newcomer ordered.

The robber lowered his gun and began to move away – but before he could, the man was sidling up to him, a gun pressed to his temple.

“Drop the backpack.”

The robber’s face contorted into an ugly snarl but he obeyed, taking off into the night.

“Thanks,” Max said. “You just saved my life.”

Max received a curt nod in response. The man said, “If you’re alright, you should get going.”

Max should have done just that. A man in uniform at times like this was never good news.

“Who are you?” Max asked curiously instead.

The man opened his mouth and closed it again, taken aback at the question. “I’m just a passer-by.”

“You think I’m stupid? Look – that uniform,” Max gestured, “it’s familiar, but I don’t remember where I’ve seen it before.”

The man hesitated. “I’m...part of an organization, yes.”

Max made a face. “Please don’t tell me you’re from the United Nations.”

The man gave a dry laugh. “No, I would never – I...wait, what year is this?”

That was a loopy question, but Max wasn’t about to be rude to someone who had just saved his life. “It’s 2069.”

The man's eyes widened. He cast a glance around his surroundings, taking in the deserted streets, dilapidated buildings and broken signboards as if he were observing them for the very first time.

Then the man straightened up and slid his gun back into its holster, his mouth set into a firm line. "We're not safe in the open. Do you know a place where we can talk?"

"I'm Max."

"Hm?"

"I'm Max," Max said slowly. "If we're going to do this properly, then we should probably start with knowing each other's names."

The man blinked. His face was impassive, but Max swore he saw the edges of his mouth curl into a small smile. "David."

"David," Max repeated, satisfied that he had a name to go with the person who had just saved his life. "Alright. Let's go home."

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'Home' turned out to be a row of derelict buildings – and even then residences were *under* the building, not in it. The both of them made the journey back carefully, weaving in and out of the shadows as silently as possible. David possessed the agility of a trained officer – and for that, Max was glad.

After making sure that they had not been followed, Max lifted a trapdoor to reveal a steel ladder. When questioned, Max gave David a strange look and said, "It's too risky to remain above ground."

“How many are there of you?” David asked, climbing down.

“There’s around thirty of us, give or take. The numbers change every now and then.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Max shrugged. “You know what I mean. People come and go.”

The *people die* part was left unsaid, but David seemed to understand.

“This seems large for a regular basement,” David observed, following Max down the narrow hallway. The path was dark, save for the faint orange glow of Max’s flashlight.

“We, ah, renovated,” Max said, feeling himself grin with pride. “This was already our territory even before the civil war began. When shit happened, we quickly improvised.”

“You mentioned the civil war,” David said, his voice dropping. “What happened?”

Max laughed. “Dude, have you been living under a rock? Everyone *knows* what happened. I mean, we even have UN *peacekeepers*. America with peacekeepers, man. We’re the laughingstock of the world.”

Max expected David to laugh, but he didn’t. Feeling incredulous, Max said, “Wait, are you seriously asking?”

“Yes, I am *seriously asking*,” David said, his voice sombre. “Tell me everything.”

They were reaching the end of the underground hallway. There was an outline of light behind the door, where Max could hear faint chatter and laughter coming from within. Laughter was a good sign – it meant that everyone was still alive. Obviously.

“I’ll tell you after I introduce you to them,” he said, watching with amusement as David seemed to clam up in nervousness. “Don’t worry, they’re nice – might be a little wary of outsiders at first, but once they trust you they’ll treat you right.”

Max rapped on the door sharply – three soft, and three loud.

“It’s a code,” Max stage-whispered to David, who only looked terrified.

The door swung open to reveal a room dimly lit with gas lamps, where shadows of various shapes manifested on rough, uneven walls. There were no chairs or tables – people laid mats on the ground instead, creating an odd mix of colours amidst the flickering glow.

Pairs of eyes swivelled to eye Max and David, their laughter ceasing immediately.

“Who’s this?” The sharp voice belonged to a girl who had her hands busy bandaging a man’s wound.

“This,” Max said, pushing David to the front, “is David. I was out looting some shop and got ambushed on the way back, and…”

The girl was up and inspecting Max before he could even finish his sentence. She hovered around, checking Max for signs of injury. “You got *ambushed*? Are you alright?”

“Calm down, Alice. I’m fine.”

Said girl – Alice – raised a questioning eyebrow.

“I’m alright, I swear,” Max added, fond and exasperated by Alice’s persistence. Being one of their medics, Alice was naturally concerned for everyone’s wellbeing.

She also happened to be Max’s younger sister.

“That’s one hell of a uniform,” the injured man pointed out, trying to stand up.

“Sit down before you bleed all over the floor,” Alice snapped. She turned back to Max and David, waiting for an explanation. “Well?”

Max cleared his throat. “Guys, this is David. He saved my life. Like I said, I got ambushed by some robber with a gun who wanted my supplies – he was gonna kill me too, but David showed up and saved my life.”

David looked away, scratching his head in embarrassment.

What happened next was phenomenal. The chattering resumed and people stood up, moving over to talk to David – there were whispered thanks, fervent handshakes, and friendly shoulder pats. The animosity was replaced with warmth and approval. Max watched as David relaxed, accepting their praise with quiet humbleness.

“Alright, give him a break. David’s come a long way and will be staying the night. Since we have no spare rooms,” Max said loudly, casting David a furtive look, “he can have that sleeping bag and snag the extra spot at my room.”

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“Those fit you well,” Max said. David was dressed in some of Max’s old things – a pair of sweatpants and a loose T-shirt that Max had bought when Kuala Lumpur’s night markets still existed. It made David look like a normal person instead of some strict officer in a uniform.

David chuckled. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

Max scrunched his eyebrows. “Dude, you’re so formal. *I’m* the one who should be thanking you – you saved my life, remember?”

David smiled, folding his uniform into a neat pile. “I did what I had to do. Now, will you please tell me everything about the civil war?”

“Can I just summarize everything up in a sentence?”

“You can try,” David said, a dubious look on his face, “though I doubt that will be sufficient.”

“Well, the world’s in a second Cold War,” Max said, as if that explained everything.

That apparently still didn’t make sense to David – if anything, he looked more confused than ever. “But the first Cold War between America and the Soviet Union ended half a century ago.”

“Second, David, *second*. The world’s in for another round.” Max felt his lips curl into a sneer. “It’s China and America, man. China and America.”

“A squabble between China and America caused a *civil war*?” David asked, his face darkening.

“Why are you so surprised?” Max asked. “You should know of this already. Anyway, it’s not just us, man. The whole world’s going to hell too, in case you’re still living in yesterday.”

David exhaled, but didn’t answer the question. He gestured, instead, for Max to continue.

“Things nowadays are...more complicated,” Max said slowly. “Back then, it was easy to determine who the enemies were. Soviets, North Korea – anything related to Communism equalled *baaad*. It’s not the case today. Some believe nuclear weapons are the only solution,

some are polishing their guns for the NATO, some are throwing themselves to the Chinese. Everyone's loyal to something *different*."

David nodded.

"You know what happens when everyone is loyal to something different? Civil war. No clear vision. No clear rules. It's a messy game where everyone backstabs other, and it ends up hurting like a bitch. No one knows what's going on. Ah, good, you get it," Max said in approval, smirking at the look of realization on David's face. "It's not just political ideologies that's being disputed, 'ya know. And now that I've explained everything to you, it's your turn to answer some of *my* questions."

David's shoulders tensed. "What do you want to know?"

"I want to know who you are. There's definitely a story behind that uniform," Max said, waggling his eyebrows.

David opened his mouth and closed it again, struggling to find the exact words to use. Finally, he sighed and said, "Very well. I'm a Time Agent."

Max felt shock ripple through him at the man's very words. *Time Agent*. Max had heard about Time Agents – who hadn't, anyway? Time Agents were special people – people who were specifically trained to handle time machines, people who were walking encyclopaedias of knowledge.

The uniform on David's lap – it was the uniform of a Time Agent.

After the Civil War began, America's official Time Travel Headquarters in DC was attacked. Not even the Headquarters' superior security technology could stop a mass of angry citizens, and the Time Travel Headquarters had ceased to exist ever since. There were very



few Time Agents in the first place, and Max heard that all of them had fled – fearful of being kidnapped by predators who would use them for selfish, destructive purposes.

Max had never met a Time Agent until now.

And somehow, he felt pissed to no end.

“What the hell is a Time Agent doing in one of the most dangerous places in America?” Max asked, his voice low with anger.

David’s eyes widened. “If it troubles you, I can leave and…”

“NO!” Max yelled. Startled by his outburst, he said, “Look, it’s dangerous out there. Everyone’s trying to hunt the Time Agents down, David – you guys are the only ones who can use time machines. Every single player on the political chessboard wants to travel into the future to see how they can further their stupid, *fucked up* guerrilla campaigns.” Max gave David a hard glare, willing for him to understand. “If you get caught, it’s over. You’ll be used over and over again until you’re dead.”

David remained silent for a few seconds, and when he looked at Max this time his gaze was hard. “Are you thinking of using me?”

Max froze.

It would be easy to use David, Max thought, so very easy. The Time Agent was armed, sure, but even someone like him couldn’t take on everyone in this base. He could make David take him into the future and easily use the information gained for his personal needs. If a disastrous fight were to occur on a certain day, he would devise a plan around it. He would win every single fight and make Texas his very own personal heaven.

Max could do anything.

He would be strong. Powerful. No one would have to die anymore. Everyone with him would never have to suffer again.

He could give Alice a better life.

*But...*

“Nah.”

“...Nah?” David repeated, an astounded expression on his face.

“Nah, I’m not going to use you. Better yet, I’ll keep the fact that you’re a Time Agent a secret.” Max grinned, satisfied to see the stunned expression on David’s face. “What? Sure, with you I’d be unstoppable – but it just wouldn’t feel right, you know? I want to live my life without cheating. Besides, there’s no use trying to outrun death. If I die, I die *fabulously*. Understand?”

David smiled.

It wasn’t a yuck-I’m-forcing-this or an I’m-slightly-humored-by-your-non-existent-wit smile – it was a genuine smile that held the authenticity of a friend.

Max had never felt so good for such a long time.

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“So why exactly are you in 2069?” Max asked nonchalantly during breakfast the next day.

Max expected David to be defensive at such an invasive question. David, however, only looked sheepish. “Well...”

“Hey, if it’s top secret James Bond stuff, then don’t worry about it.”

“No, it’s just embarrassing,” David said, muttering through a mouthful of canned spaghetti. “Being in 2069 was a mistake. I was heading to the past, but flipped a wrong switch and ended up in the future instead. I crash-landed, if you must know. We aren’t allowed to travel to the future, which is why time machines aren’t equipped to handle it.”

“You crash-landed,” Max repeated, a look of awe on his face. “Where’s your machine?”

David made a face. “It’s not so much of a machine, more like a device that’s on me – hard to explain, really. I’ve already done most of the repairs last night – all I need to do is to wait for it to charge up and then I’ll return to my own time.”

Max bit into his own toast, relishing at how warm it was. “So what you’re saying is that you’re temporarily stuck with us until your machine gets powered up.”

David didn’t respond, which Max took as a ‘yes’.

“Huh.” Max didn’t really get it, but whatever. This whole time stuff wasn’t really his business anyway. “Oh, well. Guess you’re coming on a raid with us today.”

David looked up. “*What?*”

“You heard me. The men were pretty beaten up last night, you know – whatever medicine we obtained, we’ve used it up. We need to get some more,” Max said with a shrug.

“I thought you weren’t going to use me,” David said firmly, eyes dark and frosty.

Seeing as others were now staring with unconcealed curiosity, Max lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’m not gonna use you for time-traveling purposes, but we could definitely use

some extra help when it comes to missions.” At David’s glare, Max quickly said, “Don’t look at me like that, we’re not asking you to kill anyone. We just need you as a backup, that’s all.”

David seemed to contemplate this, searching Max’s face for signs of a threat. Max relaxed his posture, trying to look as earnest as possible.

Finally, David said forlornly, “I don’t have a choice in this, do I?”

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Fieldwork, David decided, was definitely not his area of expertise. He only time-travelled only when it was necessary, and most of the time it involved going into the past with tour groups or students.

But he did not time-travel into the future.

*Never into the future.*

It was against the Time Travel Act, for one – but David was personally against it, either. Travelling into the future was risky business – anything you did there could change the past, like one of those sci-fi movies he used to watch. There was also the matter of knowing far too much if you time-travelled into the future, where you could use that sort of knowledge to your advantage.

David had been careless – and now he was stuck in future Texas, of all places, aware of things that he was not supposed to know. He glanced at Max and his little team, feeling lost as they geared up cheerily for their raid. They looked happy and enthusiastic, but David knew the circumstances that united them had been hard. Still, in the worst circumstances, they had adapted. David had witnessed the bond they shared; seen the fluidity in their actions.

What they had was more than teamwork – it was *trust*.

And that was why David stayed out of the way as they broke through layers and layers of security, charging through hallways with weapons on their hands. David wouldn't interfere. He *wasn't* part of the team, and decisions were best left to them as long as they knew what they were in for.

He wouldn't mess with the future. He wouldn't tell them what they were doing was wrong or right. He wouldn't stop them from doing what they were doing. David did not belong to this era – he was nothing but a bystander.

He was happy, though, that canned spaghetti existed even in an apocalyptic America.

“Got it,” Alice called out, hefting a heavy backpack on her shoulder stuffed with penicillin, antibiotics, gauzes, bandages and medical paraphernalia.

Max whooped in glee, and David couldn't help but smile...

...until the moment was shattered by a burly security guard, his heavy footsteps thudding against the ground. Snarling and hurling obscenities, he charged up to David, the transmitter at his belt crackling with barked orders.

David, wide-eyed and never having faced a situation like this before, slammed the butt of his gun hard against the man's head. He watched, transfixed, as the man slid down like a limp rag-doll.

The group stared.

“It was an accident,” David protested weakly. Had he just killed a man? Had he *changed* the future?

Max knelt down. “He's still breathing.”

David heaved a sigh of relief. “Good. Let’s go.”

Max whistled, picking the unconscious guard up and slinging him over his shoulder like he weighed nothing at all.

“What are you doing?” David asked, startled.

Max snorted. “We’re taking him back, obviously.”

“But – why can’t we just *leave* him here?”

There was a predatory gleam in Max’s eyes that chilled David to the bone. “This guy’s gonna be useful.”

In other words, there was going to be some torturing involved.

David shivered. *What on earth had he gotten himself into?*

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David’s Time Machine had just finished powering up when he heard screams echo around the bunker.

“Alice?”

Alice looked up, her eyes tired.

David hesitated, but decided to ask anyway. “The questioning...it’s begun, hasn’t it?”

Alice nodded, her face grim.

The screams increased in volume. David winced as a particular tortured wail pierced through the air.

“I don’t like it either, you know.” Her voice was oddly gentle, like a parent explaining the concept of death to a young child. “But Max...Max insists on doing this in order to keep us safe.”

“It’s not right,” David said automatically. “Don’t you all ever let him know how you feel about things like this?”

Alice merely shrugged. David swore inwardly, feeling anger course through him. A memory of Max’s smiling face appeared in David’s head – Max had been so friendly; so grateful to have had David around. Max wasn’t supposed to be doing this.

David also *wasn’t* supposed to be engaging the people of 2069 in a moral debate – he was supposed to be getting the hell out of here.

Which was why he was going to regret what he was about to do.

David stormed his way over to the next room and watched as Max barely gave him a second glance, his attention on the bound man before him. David tried not to look at the blood-stained scalpel in Max’s hands; tried not to look at the bleeding cuts and gashes that littered the screaming man.

“So. Pleasantries aside, you ready to tell me more?” Max asked casually, as if he was asking what was on the lunch menu instead of carrying out an interrogation.

The man shook his head repeatedly, a terrified look on his face. “I don’t know! My job’s only to protect that place. I don’t know anything else! I swear!”

Max narrowed his eyes, clearly not liking that answer one bit. He stepped forward, scalpel gleaming under the light. The man hissed as the sharpness touched his skin, desperate to shrink away from the impending pain.

“That’s enough,” David said, throwing a heavy hand onto Max’s shoulder. “He won’t be able to tell you anymore.”

Max tensed up. “What are you doing?”

David glared. “I’m stopping you – something I should have done sooner.”

For a few seconds, Max didn’t say anything.

And then, in a sweeping move that took David by surprise, Max swung around and shoved David up against a wall so hard that the air rushed out of his lungs with a *whoosh*.

“Listen here, David – just because you saved my life last night and helped out this morning doesn’t mean you get to have a say in things like this. You don’t interfere in my decisions,” Max said, his eyes flashing angrily. “This guy here just needs a few more rounds and he’ll tell me everything we need to know. You’ll see.”

The idea of a few more ‘rounds’ made David sick to his stomach. “Max, I’m not trying to order you around – but hurting others to get something you want? That’s *not* right!”

“And what would you think is *right*, then?” Max taunted with a sneer. “In case you haven’t noticed, nothing has been right for years!”

“That may be true,” David argued, “but this isn’t right, and you know it. You wouldn’t be better than those who fight and kill with their... *fucked up guerrillas*, to quote your words, if you continue!”

Something in Max seemed to crack, but he held his ground. When he spoke, his voice was raw and angry. “Do you even know what we’ve been through? Every day, we wake up to nothing but uncertainty. We live every single moment like its our last, because that’s just how



it is! You haven't lived through *our* war, so don't you dare speak as if you know everything! We're *broken!* There's nothing left for us anymore!"

David thought about Alice and the rest of the people who lived here. Of course, David thought wearily. Of course this was what mattered to Max the most. Max wasn't interested in winning a war – all he wanted to do was to keep the people with him safe.

"This still isn't right. It's true that I have never lived your lives. But," David took a deep breath, gently manoeuvring out of Max's death grip, "you're wrong about one thing."

Max laughed bitterly. "Yeah? What is it?"

David smiled sadly. "None of you are broken."

Something like a cross between a gasp and chuckle escaped Max.

"It's true," David insisted, holding Max's vulnerable gaze. "None of you are broken, because I see nothing that needs to be mended. Instead, I see *strength* – so much strength."

"*Strength?*"

"Strength and courage," David said gently, "from a simple man who wants to protect his family and the ones who need it. Strength from a group of people who trust each other implicitly and fight to live for better days ahead. Strength from people who care for each other because that's what matters to them the most."

Max sank to his knees, something like a torn sob escaping his lips. He sagged against the wall, all fight leaving him completely. "Stop. You don't get it. It's been hard. Life has been hard for all of us."

“I know, and I wish there was an easy way out of this.” David bent down to meet Max at eye-level, ignoring the rough scrape of granite on his skin. “But you’re strong. You’re stronger than you know. Do the right thing, Max.”

Max fell silent for several moments.

“Alice,” he called.

Alice appeared in the doorway, casting a worried glance at them both. She gave David a questioning look, but David merely shrugged.

“Lock him up,” Max said wearily, gesturing towards the shivering, bleeding man. “Clean his wounds and give him something to eat.”

The look of relief on Alice’s face, David thought, was definitely worth the trouble.

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“Thank you,” David said gratefully.

Max laughed wearily. “What for?”

“For doing the right thing. For allowing the man to live. For listening to me.”

Max’s breath hitched and he swallowed, blinking rapidly in order to prevent tears from falling. David sat next to him in companionable silence, choosing not to comment at his dishevelled state.

“You know, I’m still not sure how I’m going to...carry on,” Max confessed. “I’m just a person, David. It’s hard telling a wrong from a right, and my judgement *can* be pretty fucked up.”

David had no answers to that, and yet somehow he did. “Then all you need to do is to rely on the good judgement of those around you, isn’t it?” At Max’s astonished face, David continued, “They care for you, you know – Alice and everyone else, they’d look out for you just like how you look out for them. Talk to them. Ask them for their opinions. They’re part of your life, just like how you’re part of theirs.”

“I...yeah...”

“You will get through this,” David said decisively. “You have pulled through before – you will pull through again.”

Max grinned, shoving David lightly on the shoulder. “Dude, that was *so* deep.”

David laughed harder at that way more than he should have.

“Thanks a lot,” Max repeated, his voice low but sincere. “For everything.”

David merely smiled...

...and disappeared in a glow of blue.

**The End**