

Two pairs of boots crunched in the snow ahead of the sled. The two men struggled to pull it forward, though none would admit it to the other. The children's sled was two times smaller than the horse carcass that occupied it. Their exasperated breaths carried on the cold December night air. Mr. McGillicuddy's stable was no longer in sight behind them as they finally made it to the tree line. One of the men finally decided to break the long silence by loudly grunting and dropping his rope to the snowy ground.

"Are you done?" said Jake to his brother, who was leaning against a nearby tree.

"Can I- Can I just take a break?" Brandon replied in between short forceful breaths.

"The sooner we get it to the lake the sooner we can call it a night."

"Are you an expert on dumping bodies now?" Brandon said with a chuckle.

His brother remained silent and his face dropped very suddenly. Brandon's eyes widened as he lifted himself from the tree.

"I mean I just assume you didn't have much experience dumping horse bodies in Syria."

Brandon managed to say that with an unconvincing smile.

"You'd be surprised." Jake remained stoic, not giving any hint to his brother. He tossed his flashlight to Brandon and leaned down to pick the other rope off the ground with his free hand. He gripped it tight into his leather glove and began moving forward.

"It's alright, you can take a break. I got this."

Brandon grunted as he tried to wrestle the rope from him. "No, no. It's fine! I'm good." He passed back the flashlight and took the rope into his two hands. "You know we don't need to be doing this."

"He needed help. You expect a forty-three year-old man to get rid of a horse by himself?"

“Well, he has ranch hands for that doesn’t he?” said Brandon “Besides, isn’t his daughter like eight years old? You would think she could handle a dead horse with what kids are exposed to these days.”

“As a kid would you want to wake up to Buster being dead on Christmas morning?”

“Oh come on, a dog is different from a horse.”

“How?”

“A dog is easier to carry for one,” Brandon laughed loud enough for the sound to echo through the forest. Jake simply looked at his brother for a moment, before turning his attention back to the trail. “What?” said Brandon “It was a joke. You used to love my jokes!”

“Not everything has to be a joke.”

“Hey,” Brandon says, a look of concern replacing his jovial demeanor, “Is everything alright with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just that...I noticed how weird you got back at the house. After Stacy asked you to tell that Syria story.”

“I’m just tired. The drive up here was long and she’s been asking me to tell her army stories since I got back.” Jake could feel his boot laces coming loose and instinctively bent down to fix them up.

“No, I get that. Just seemed a little off to me.” Brandon took the brief reprieve to lean over and take a deep breath. “You probably don’t want to talk about any of that war stuff either.”

“I got no problem talking about it. It happened, you know.” He pulled his laces tight, took the rope and pushed forward in one swift movement.

“Sure.” Brandon responded trying to keep pace with his brother. After a minute, he asked “Is there one you don’t want to tell her?”

“One what?”

“Army story.”

“Oh.” Jake muttered “Yeah, sure.”

“Like what?”

“Uh,” Jake held the sound in his mouth like he was trying to tune a piano. The sound lingered in the air for what felt like minutes before he spoke. “Ok, so. We were headed close to a DMZ to help out a group of snake eaters.”

“You’re going to have to slow down on the jargon, man.”

“Sorry, force of habit.” Jake let out a stifled laugh “We were going to a hostile territory to help special ops guys.” Brandon nodded along while his brother spoke. “We were only supposed to be there to help evac civvies- evacuate civilians.”

“Ok, I’m not *that* out of the know.”

“We were set up in a Humvee” Jake acknowledged Brandon’s lament with a smile. “My friend Danvers was driving, The CO was in the passenger seat, Moore was behind him and I was the gunner. We pull up to this small village, sweep the place for IEDs and do all of our checks. Everything’s good. The special op guys start walking through the village, and we’ve got no idea what they’re looking for. I still have no idea.”

“Are you just saying that because you’re not allowed to say?”

“No, I honestly don’t know. We were just out there for support. Danvers starts talking shit about Moore and we all get in on it. I remember I was thinking about getting back early so I could get a hot meal. That’s about when we heard the call over the radio. One of the snake eaters

was calling out for help, and you could hear people hollering in the background. It wasn't just over the radio. We could hear people screaming from outside the Humvee."

"Wow." was all Brandon could manage to say in response.

"I hear them yelling out 'Help! Help!' and I turn my gun to get a beat on...well, on something. That's when I spot it. It's not easy to miss. Black smoke going up, there's a whole fucking hut on fire. I see people running out and falling to the ground. 'Help! Help!' It's like the worst sound you could possibly imagine, man."

"What do you do?"

"There's not much I can do. I ask my CO for permission to fire, but he gives me the no-go. I don't know what he was doing down there but we were out there for what felt like forever listening to them screaming. I wanted to grab the gun and make it stop."

"Why didn't you?" Brandon finally managed to keep pace with Jake, ignoring the pain in his feet and shoulders.

"That's not how it works." Jake said "You can't just do things without orders, you know? Every bullet is like a dollar of taxpayers money, so everything we do has to go through a dozen people before we could even let out a sneeze."

"So you just had to sit there?"

"Yeah. We sat there until the screaming died down. The fire was more smoke than flame, I noticed an awful smell in the air and, for some god-damned reason, I was actually about to make a fart joke if you can believe it when I got the orders to fire on the hut"

"Really?"

"Yeah" Jake said with an awkward laugh under his breath "I don't know what I was thinking, I don't even think fart jokes are funny. It was just the first thing that came to mind."

“No, I mean...you were ordered to shoot at the hut with people in it?” Unlike his brother, Brandon couldn’t begin to hide the emotion from his face.

“Well, we couldn’t confirm-I mean, well...Yeah, you don’t know if there are hostiles in there. I guess my CO made a call and I didn’t have the choice to stop and think about it.” The sled got caught on a rock, stopping the two in their tracks. “Shit.”

Jake leaned down and began to shovel snow from around the rock with his hand. Brandon dropped the rope and found himself leaning against another tree. “How did you feel about that?”

“In the moment you don’t really think about it. You just do it. I just really remember being surprised at how easily the gun cut through the hut. It’s like poking holes through tinfoil.”

The rock loosens and Jake pulls it out of the ground tossing it aside. “Did you get whoever you were supposed to get?” Brandon asked, getting up from his leaning position and stretching out his arms before taking the rope again.

“I fired until I couldn’t fire anymore.” Jake turned his head away from his brother and faced the path ahead. “After a few moments, my CO had me and Moore head out to sweep the hut.”

“You had to go into the place you just shot up?” Brandon said quickly turning to Jake “If the special op guys needed help, why would they send you in?”

“We’re grunts, it’s what we do. ‘Sides if anyone managed to survive that, don’t think there’s anything they could do.” Jake rubbed his eye with his free hand, the frost from his glove cooling his face. “Moore and I walk up to this hut and the smell...man, that smell. I can’t even begin to describe it. Remember that time we tried to toss out Aunt Grace’s nasty beef thing in the garbage disposal?”

“Yeah.” Brandon laughed remembering the incident. “Oh wow, yeah that stunk up the house a whole month. I remember dad started tearing down walls trying to find a dead animal.”

“Yeah. Well, this was even worse than that, if you can imagine. It was mixed in with that sulfur smell from the bullets, I don’t know about Moore but I was about to lose the lunch I hadn’t even eaten yet. But we keep moving because we have to. Moore took point outside, so I would be the first one to go through the doorway. You know what’s funny?”

“Huh?”

“In that moment, all I could think about was that I never finished watching those Star Wars movies.”

Brandon remained silent.

“I peeked in with my light on, and it was FUBAR. It was like it was never a place where people lived before. I think the thing that struck me the most was the tv on the floor.”

“Why?”

“It was one of those old huge black ones. You remember the one we used to have in our room? I could swear it was the exact same model. Some family still sat down and watched that piece of shit TV.” Jake’s laugh came out hollow, Brandon never took his eyes off his brother.

“What did you see in there?”

“Twelve men. Eight women. Five children.”

The trees rustled in the wind, drowning out the sound of the sled cutting through the snow. After a moment Brandon said “Jesus.”

Brandon turned away and Jake redoubled his effort in hiking up the dead horse. The two remained silent until they got to the shore of the lake. The layer of ice above the lake gave it almost a shine.

“Let’s get it done.” Jake got himself behind the horse and began to push.

“Jake.” Brandon said, softly.

“Yeah?”

“I found the gun.”

“What?”

“I found the gun in your bedside drawer.”

Jake said nothing, shoving his entire body into the horse’s.

“Jake?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Can we talk about it?”

“No.”

Brandon watched gravity take the horse down towards the lake as its body collided with the ice, and a loud cracking sound reverberated through the forest.

“Jake?”

“What?”

“It’s Christmas.” Brandon says showing his brother the time on his phone.

“So, it is. Merry Christmas, man.” Jake stared at the carcass slowly sinking into the pitch darkness of the frost covered lake.

“Horses don’t die on Christmas.” Brandon moved towards his brother, taking the risk of putting his arm around him.

“No, they don’t.” Jake says, leaning into his older brother.

The brothers sat on the sled and watched a dead horse disappear from sight on a cold December night.