



THE FIRST STEP

The calm of the night air was in stark contrast to the tension felt on both sides of the battlefield. And the mist that hung over the ground was eerily more reminiscent of a wispy burial shroud than it was a ground advection fog; a cold, damp, impersonal veil that would cover the final resting place of the bodies that now lived and breathed on either side of the line.

The moment no one wanted had arrived. Both of the world's superpowers were at the same place at the same time, their weapons trained on each other, ready for the conflict that everyone on earth thought unthinkable but was now inevitable.

The two 'biggest boys on the block' were in place to annihilate each other and with most certainty take most of the world's loyalist populations along with them.

The situation had unfolded rather quickly after one side of a small, insignificant but 'politically-compromised' nation on the other side of the world asked for help in their conflict. The other half of the conflicted country asked for assistance from the 'other side'-a world superpower of many decades, in eternal opposing views of the previously mentioned champion.

The prize for the victor was world dominance through monopolizing its energy resources. The commodity that made that monopoly possible was Energerium, the commercial name for a newly-discovered energy source. Energerium was a crystal from which could be extracted huge amounts of energy with very little adaptation or manipulation of its basic form. And unlike radioactive materials, it was radiation-free, making it a safe power source as well. Since the world's only deposit of this New Hope lay buried within the boundaries of the small, conflicted nation, each side rushed to its aid with alarming alacrity. And because of near totally depleted fossil fuel reserves and limited availability due to political or legal constraints to obtain them, the energy future of the entire world was at stake and neither side was willing to let it go.

The quick and sure massive buildup of military personnel and machines, the likes of which had never been seen, established the tone and it was a grim one. Naval task forces from both countries comprised of aircraft carriers, destroyers, hover cruisers, supply ships and several submarines were floating in the coastal waters nearby. Just a few miles inland were the heavily fortified underground command posts which directed the positions of armored and infantry divisions, drone recon aircraft, medical and evac units, as well as supply and ammunition contingents of the mighty war machines.

Both sides were evenly and devastatingly armed enough to destroy each other many hundreds of times over. Their positions of men and machines were strategically placed and awaiting orders for tactical deployment. What made this particular confrontation all the more unique was the technology that each side had: it had taken the secrecy out of where everything was located. At regular intervals each country's satellites in space captured detailed images of the placement of all the war machines and their makeup. And heat sensitive and sonic imaging units in the air and on the ground, aptly mapped the positions of troop locations and movements. Each command post knew exactly where everybody was at any given time of the day or night. The element of surprise had been taken away by technology's finest recon and surveillance devices. The only surprise left now was who was going to give the order to fire first.

The build up of men and *matériel* took place over the span of several weeks and was hardly a surprise to anyone, either. Media and network news VTOL aircraft, (known as "helicopters" in an earlier, more primitive version and time) shadowed both naval task forces as they made their way to their destination, broadcasting their locations and movement in high definition to the entire world. There had been instances of the news crews getting too close to the ships and were actually fired upon once they crossed over the outer marker of the country's boundary with international waters. Once inside the country's airspace, the news crews were in a war zone and were subject to the rules of the engagement and the defense laws of the country itself. Several news VTOL's had been shot down, their crews lost, when they got too close to command centers, airfields and gun emplacements. Most now positioned themselves in a designated neutral zone for media, several miles equidistant from both sides overlooking what was anticipated to be the main battlefield. Their location was not unlike having seats on the fifty yard line at a football game.

Not to be at a disadvantage determined by the military leaders, the news media crews closed the distance between them and the battle area with commercially available

highly sensitive imaging equipment and digital processing units – which, ironically, were developed for the military in the first place. The stage was set and the players were in place waiting for the curtain to rise to a world audience.

Inside the command area perimeter of the Western Power small armored vehicles came and went at regular intervals. Heavily armored Ramses II PCV's (Personal Command Vehicles) shuttled unit commanders to and from the thick Milcrete bunkers inside and then out to the photonic gate and beyond to the area outside the high voltage fence. Inside the commander's war room a staff meeting had just concluded when his SIC (Second In Command) walked through the door to report to his superior. As he did so he saluted smartly.

"We are ready and awaiting your orders, sir. Just give the word and we'll follow them to their ultimate conclusion."

"You'll be the first to know, Colonel!" said the General, with a bit of comedic tone in his voice.

"Yes, sir!"

The General sat down in a chair, folded his arms across his chest and stretched his legs, crossing them at the ankles.

"We're good to go here. How is everything out there on the front line? Morale good? They'll be the first to get hit. How they doing, Colonel?"

"Do you want a good report, sir? Or do I have permission to speak freely?"

The General smiled out the corner of his mouth and scoffed.

"We've known each other a long time. You know what I want to hear: the cold, hard facts. Not something some new el-tee fresh out of school would spout out of his baby face trying to make me feel good!"

"Yes, sir. I know."

"I'm making my rounds out there tonight. I want to know before I go so I don't get any fake gung ho bullshit from the newbies up front. Shut the door and spill it."

The Colonel closed the door behind him and The General motioned for him to sit in the chair next to him. The Colonel sat and leaned forward, clasping his hands together.

“Praying, Colonel?” the General said, amusedly as he looked toward his officer’s folded hands.

Awkwardly, the Colonel unfolded his hands and sat back in his chair staring straight ahead. He turned his head to look at his commanding officer.

“No one wants this, General. Oh, they’ll fight to the last projectile and piece of armor because that’s what they’re trained to do. And they are loyal so they will obey their orders when they receive them. And they’ll do it with aggressiveness because they all want to go out fighting. And they will fight to the last man because...”

The Colonel paused for a moment and stared blankly at the floor.

“Go on,” the General urged. “There’s more. Let’s hear it.”

The Colonel stretched his neck from one side to the other and ran the palm of his hand down over his face and let out a sigh.

“They have been seeing more on the news than what we are giving them. They are caught up in the hype. They believe what the world believes—-that no one on either side is going to come out of this alive.”

There was a long pause, allowing both men to collect their thoughts.

“Well, maybe they’re right, Colonel. Maybe they’re right. Either way, it doesn’t really matter does it?”

“Sir?” asked the Colonel quizzically.

“We’re here. Everything else is academic. We don’t have the luxury of feelings to make it good or bad, right or wrong? We just do it. Right, Colonel?”

The Colonel stared back down at the floor and shook his head from side-to-side. The General gave him a moment.

“Tell me what you know about our opponent, Colonel. Is he the man I think he is? Obviously, he’s intelligent or he wouldn’t be where he is now. But what is he like?”

The Colonel shrugged.

“He’s new, having been assigned only recently. His biography has not been made public or posted. And his military credentials have not yet been accessed. I have

no doubt all that is intentional, sir. The less we know about him, they figure, the better. A late substitution in the game, I suppose.”

“What about *him*? What do we know about the *man*? And you can drop the ‘sir’ stuff in here. It’s just us.”

The Colonel took a long, deep breath and began his report.

“We were able to intercept and decrypt some of his personal correspondences. He speaks our language perfectly. He knows it inside and out. There will be no misunderstanding if and when, you want to communicate with him. Other than that, we know very little.”

“You said “personal correspondences”? What was their content? What did he talk about? Does he have a family?”

The Colonel reached inside his tunic and pulled out a HemiPadd. Scrolling through it briefly, he found the information he was looking for.

“He does. Most of the correspondences we intercepted were encrypted digital texts home to his wife who, by the way, was one of our citizens, that’s why he was speaking our language, I would assume. Interesting...”

The Colonel continued skimming through the information, verbalizing the most relevant content as he went.

“...He tells her how much he misses her, the usual stuff. He talks about getting his kids started with the planting of their garden...he tells her to not let them watch too many broadcasts or...uh, keep their minds occupied...he loves her...and that he will see her...soon. Hmm...confident.”

The pause in their conversation was punctuated with the distinctive sound of distant small arms fire. It originated from what seemed to be a perimeter position, many thousands of yards distant. The two looked at each other with equal looks of disbelief.

“Get on the horn and find out what the hell is going on, Colonel,” said the General emphatically. “And make sure that firing ceases immediately! We do not want this escalating at this point, understood? Nobody fires on anything! Dismissed!”

"Yes, sir," the Colonel barked back and executed a crisp salute and about-face and exited the room. A few more distant shots rang out then stop abruptly. The silence was welcome but created a sense of uneasiness in its wake.

The exterior of the General's office, which was moments before a cacophonous roar of vocal and electronic sound activity, then took on a deathly silence. Many long minutes passed before a transmission from the perimeter position finally broke the tension and crackled a distorted audio message with an accompanying grainy and dark video.

"Command, this is Bravo company. Command, Bravo company. Red Platoon has taken a prisoner. We have a POW. Repeat. We have a POW. Request immediate instructions for his disposition. Command, do you copy? Over."

A junior officer seated at the MultiComm console looked to the General for confirmation. The General nodded giving him approval to confirm the message.

"Uh, Roger that and copy, Bravo company. You have a POW. Stand by. Repeat. Stand by."

The soldier on the screen looked into the camera and confirmed the order as the audio crackled again.

"Roger that, Command. Standing by," he said with no expression in his voice or on his face.

The General moved into his office followed by the Colonel and together they looked at a map projection of the base on a smooth, touch screen wall panel. The Colonel pointed to a front line sector.

"Bravo Company. Red Platoon is here, sir," said the Colonel tapping his finger on a spot on the panel.

"Dead center on the front line. What the hell..." said the General, his tone vaguely interrogative.

"He didn't even try to covertly observe or gain visual access from a flanking position, General. It's right up the gut. A defector?" asked the Colonel soliciting some sort of reconciliation.

The General took no time in making a decision.

“Let’s ask him, Colonel! Make sure he’s thoroughly processed including a scan for any subcutaneous compression triggers or ingested explosives and a thorough body cavity search. Then get his squeaky clean ass up here, pronto.”

He thought for a moment, considering the possibility that they might be on the receiving end of a diversionary tactic of some sort and then added, “We may be on a time limit and not know it.”

“Sir?”

The General continued, choosing not to explain himself, adding sarcastically, “Or maybe he just took a walk in the woods and got lost. Let’s find out. Now, Colonel!”

The time spent waiting for the prisoner to arrive was not unlike the same feeling one gets when waiting for a doctor’s report on the outcome of a close relative’s surgery. Eventually, he arrived completely surrounded by a cadre of heavily armed and highly disciplined MP’s. An Intelligence Officer walked ahead of the procession which snaked its way past vehicle barriers through the compound to the opening of the Milicrete bunker. The prisoner looked none the worse for wear from his “processing,” and marched step for step with his escorts through the Command Center’s communications room and to the General’s office door.

His appearance was that of a tall, younger man of lean build and with a head of dark hair. He wore it slightly longer than what would be acceptable according to the General’s army’s standards. He was somewhat handsome, with no ruddiness or weather-beaten look to his tanned complexion. His face, though expressionless, somehow conveyed a faint look of inner satisfaction with an almost artistically rendered hint of a smile. His battle dress-style uniform, although now stripped of all other accoutrements and fasteners, still bore the rank of an enlisted, non-commissioned officer, which was inked into the fabric of the outfacing sides of both sleeves. He appeared disciplined but not rigid, confident but not cocky. The Intelligence Officer banged on the General’s door.

“Enter!” barked a voice from inside the office and the troupe of men and weapons made their way in. The Intelligence officer saluted smartly and without a word handed a HemiPadd across the desk to the General. He reviewed it quickly, signing the top with his thumbprint, pulled the internal data section out and handed the delivery module back to him. The IO gave one last salute, executed an about-face and exited. With a look and a single movement of his head, the General positioned the

MP's on either sides of the office door and came out from behind his desk. The enemy soldier snapped to a textbook form of attention and saluted him.

The General acknowledged and reciprocated his respectful gesture and gave him a swift, knife-edge salute in return as he walked around him in a full three hundred sixty degree inspection. The soldier's gaze never wandered and he remained at attention.

"So, what is your story, soldier?" the General inquired contemplatively. He continued his walking visual inspection until he came full circle and made his way behind his desk. He sat down slowly, leaned back, and clasped his hands behind his head. The soldier retained his military visage.

"At ease, soldier," the General directed. "Have a seat."

The enemy soldier immediately sat down in the chair in front of the desk without hesitation, but kept his posture and focus, his eyes straight ahead.

The General picked up a Padd and read through it, skimming as he went.

"It says here you were wearing full body armor with combat headgear...you carried a weapon that was on safety, which you immediately threw to the ground as you dropped to your knees just before you walked on into our most central forward position. You had no observation equipment of any kind on you. And you had no subcutaneous or internal explosive devices in or on your person so as to cause injury or mayhem to our place of command. Would you like to explain that to me, soldier? I mean, just exactly what were you trying to accomplish by doing that? Obviously, you weren't trying to commit suicide. And take your time. I have all night."

"Sir, are you giving me permission to speak freely, sir?" said the soldier in response.

"Affirmative, soldier!" said the General. "I wouldn't have it any other way." He paused for a few moments. "Let's hear it! Report!"

The soldier took a moment to take a quick breath.

"General Sir, you are correct. I have no suicidal tendencies, sir. I had not then, nor do I now have any intention, in thought or deed, of harm to you or the brave personnel in and under your command, sir! I simply wanted to-talk. Sir!"

The General stood abruptly from his desk sending his chair flying back to the wall behind him. The MP's tensed, surprised by the sudden action and gripped their weapons more firmly.

"Talk! What the hell do you mean, "talk"? You put this base on Ultra-Alert! And you could have started World War...whatever! Talk?! You better have something better than that, soldier! Or you are out of my sight and in the stockade in two seconds! Let's hear it!"

The captive remained silent for a few long moments as he organized his thoughts. The General sat back down in his chair and tilted his head to one side, waiting for an answer.

"What would you have me say, sir? What would you like to hear?"

The General bristled then relaxed in almost the same moment and cleared his throat.

"Well, for starters, what Commander in their right mind would give an order for someone under their command to do what you did?" said the General, prying for the name of his unknown counterpart across the line. "This is a Top Level decision. Who ordered you to do this?"

"No one ordered me to do this, General." The reply came in a rather dry tone of voice.

"Then you volunteered?"

"No sir. There were no requests for volunteers, either, sir. I did this on my own. No one knows I am here, sir," he said plainly.

The General smiled.

"So you are a defector, after all. Well, we can certainly accommodate--"

"No sir. I am not a defector. I do not seek asylum or wish to become a citizen of your country. I possess no military knowledge or secrets that you don't already know about us, nor do I wish to be executed for treason by my own people. As I said at the top of this interview, General, I just want to talk to you."

"Okay, soldier," said the General. "We will do what we must do then."

"It's our destiny," the soldier fired back.

"Somebody has to win and somebody has to lose," the General quickly replied.

"The fate of the world hangs in the balance," said the young enemy with no emotion in his voice, wasting no time in countering.

The General found himself caught up in these linguistic volleys and felt compelled to 'fire' the phrase that would end the exchange.

"We are going to leave a lot of dead bodies out there," he said, simultaneously coming to grips with the reality of his words.

"And we are going to create a lot of widows and orphans for you back home, too."

The soldier was even quicker this time with his counterpoint, as if he already knew in advance what the General would say.

The General did not reply immediately, breaking the rhythm of their exchange. After an awkward delay, the prisoner added a respectful, "Sir."

The General had not anticipated such thoroughness with his prisoner and contemplated, if only for a brief moment, his next move. The soldier took advantage of delay and took the initiative.

"Do you play chess, sir?"

"I do," said the General, somewhat surprised but more than a bit intrigued by the change in his enemy's tactics.

"Then, it appears we are both in 'check', sir."

"That's impossible. It would be a draw," said the General, defensively.

The soldier did not hesitate. "That's correct, sir. And we are not even the ones who are playing the game."

The General knew his prisoner was correct but did not have the luxury to discuss his own feelings on this impending 'war'. Even to call it that would imply it would last for any length of time, which it would not. He was in command and a commander doesn't discuss his feelings with his subordinates—he commands. Anything less would

be a sign of weakness and instill doubt in those under his command and in his ability to lead.

But as the prisoner had so aptly demonstrated, the words they had spoken were all clichés. The inevitable battle was an exercise in dogma, doctrine, discipline. He knew both of their forces were there because that was what was expected of them. They were soldiers! *It was their job*. But he also knew that by that same time in a day, a week, a month, that nothing would be left of the men and machines on either side. And in a year, or two or ten, the battlefield itself may become a soccer field or park with a single stone obelisk marking where the Last Great War had taken place. The marker may even be placed at the entrance to the parking lot of the Energerium factory.

The General was gaining a sense that this soldier was telling him things that even his own officers would, or that his intelligence corps could gather from their sources, things they already knew. He was curious now and wanted to hear more. And, he reasoned, if he allowed him the freedom to speak, he may even give up some valuable strategic information that may be useful to him. This time he took the initiative.

“You seem not to be short of any opinions, soldier. So, I’ll ask you something. Speaking hypothetically...say we both decide this is ‘war’ is futile. And let’s just assume for a second that both your Commander and I decide to end this once and for all. We just disobey direct orders from our Commanders-in-Chief and just walk away from this battle. Do you know what will happen, then?”

The soldier just gave him a look, and delayed responding just long enough to give the General the opportunity to answer his own question. The General did just that, and again took the initiative and responded, wanting to assert his opinion over that of his prisoner.

“They move our subordinates up in rank to take our place and keep it going. Then if they fail, they will replace them and do it all again the next time. Then they shoot or hang us, whichever the case may be.”

“There will be no ‘next time’, sir,” said the soldier, very self-assured.

The General took only a moment to respond knowing fully the implications of mutual destruction. But he wanted to hear more.

“What makes you so sure of that, soldier?”

The young prisoner answered immediately with no hesitation, and with a definite tone of confidence in his voice.

“Because they would walk off the field together, sir, in plain view of everyone. It would be a way to end the draw. Just knock both Kings down at the same time and the game is finally over because all the other pieces are off the board.”

“As the old adage goes: “When the game is over, the King and the Pawn go back into the same box,” the General added.

“Yes, sir, something like that.”

Admittedly, the General was feeling a real sense of camaraderie with this common enlisted man. He needed to know more.

“You seem educated. Did you go to college before your time in the service to your country?” he asked the young prisoner.

“Yes, sir. I did, as a matter of fact. I went to school in your country, sir.”

“And what did you major in, son?” the General inquired even more intrigued.

“I was a theatre major, sir.”

The General laughed heartily. “And how did that turn out, soldier?”

“I am here, sir. That in itself should be very telling of my career as an actor-Sir.”

The General frowned with a genuine look of sincerity etched across his brow.

“You could be home right now watching all this unfold on a broadcast or even be one of those newscasters. Why choose the military, son?”

“I need to eat, sir. There was a paycheck in it.”

The General laughed again. “Fair enough. But you’re smart. Why not an officer’s position? Why did you remain in the ranks of the enlisted?” inquired the General, thinking obliquely that this was one soldier he wouldn’t mind having under his own command.

“It seemed a better ‘fit’ for me. No offense intended, sir.”

"None taken, soldier," said the General now fairly convinced of his prisoner's original intentions of just wanting to 'talk'.

A knock at the door interrupted the exchange and the Colonel opened it to a contingent of junior officers waiting at the threshold, craning their necks to see inside.

"It's time for your rounds, General," the Colonel asserted. The General confirmed the reminder with a nod and, coming out from behind his desk, stood next to the captured young man. The prisoner immediately came to his feet.

"I must admit, soldier, that I have had one interesting conversation with you tonight. I admire your wit and your intelligence and your ideals. I just wish it were that easy and that all commanders--on both sides--would see it the same way as you do. Then we could all enjoy our retirement and not have to wonder about if we would ever experience it or not. Do you know what I am saying?"

"Yes, sir, I do," the soldier answered immediately. "Are you close to retirement, sir?"

"As a matter fact, I am. What made you ask that?"

"You brought up the subject, sir," said the soldier and he smiled a bit as he did so.

"Yes, I did, didn't I? That's quite observant of you, soldier. You deserve a promotion!"

"It's my job, sir," he responded plainly.

The General nodded with a look of genuine understanding and affirmation.

"Yes, I suppose it is. And I'm going to give you a chance at that promotion-and to distinguish yourself. I'm sending you back to your side."

The Colonel and the MP's briefly looked at each other but quickly regained their composure without the General noticing.

The prisoner nodded once in acknowledgement, expressionless.

"Does that surprise you, soldier?"

"I appreciate it, sir."

The General thought for a moment, taken somewhat aback by soldier's curt but grateful reply. He felt the need to explain his decision, if not to the soldier, but for those others present in the room. It was an impulsive decision and one that he thought could possibly be the last humane order he would ever give.

"Here's how I see it, son," said the General putting his hand on the soldier's right shoulder, facing him squarely. "It doesn't hardly seem fair to have you be the one and only person in the entire world who didn't get a chance to fight for his country in the last battle this world will probably ever know. Or at least, I hope that to be the case."

The young soldier looked the General directly in the eye.

"I understand, sir. Thank you."

The next morning brought a surprise of a different kind.

"He wants what?!" That's crazy! It's something out of a movie! It's archaic," ranted the General.

"There is no mistake, sir. Their Top Commanding Officer wants a dialogue in Class A dress uniforms in the middle of the battlefield to discuss our terms of engagement. It's like something out of a classic—"

"I get it, Colonel! Are there any other conditions to this meeting on the world stage?"

"Yes, sir. Both of you are to meet alone at these GPS coordinates," he said pointing his HemiPadd at the wall panel and clicking a button that displayed a map.

"You then drive to this area here and when you sight each other's vehicles, you are to halt. Then proceed on foot and stop equidistant between, each from your vehicles, once they are brought to a halt. Quote: No aides. No bodyguards. No white flags."

The General nodded slowly. "Because we already know why we are there. It's all showmanship. It's for everyone else's benefit." The General suddenly came to a realization. "He also knows we'll have snipers following along, flanking us, their sights trained on our position."

The Colonel responded wryly, speaking from the corner of his mouth.

"Yes, sir. That's why he indicates that we mark their positions by green smoke. He said, in the interest of 'good will' he will initiate it on his sniper positions first today at exactly twelve hundred hours, followed by our positions a few seconds later. The snipers will then stand to show that it was not a ruse. Artillery will be trained on those positions and if any shots are fired from any position, it will open fire on the snipers."

"A showdown at High Noon? It makes it even more ridiculous, doesn't it? And if we don't puff smoke immediately after he does? Then what?" said the General in almost disbelief.

"He pushes the button."

Both men knew exactly what that meant and did not speak for several seconds. The General broke the awkward silence.

"All these 'conditions' are for the meeting only, correct? I will be damned if I would give away those boys' positions only to have them slaughtered. So, the smoke is only as a show of good will for the peace and neutrality of the meeting? Then, dependent on the outcome of our little *tête-à-tête*, we go back to our positions of readiness, taking those guys out of harm's way. Is that how you read it?"

"Yes, sir," agreed the Colonel.

The General nodded slowly, repeatedly, staring blankly as if he were seeing the meeting in advance.

"Well, I concur. Nobody wants this. Nobody, but our political bosses and the stockholders of the world. I don't see how it will affect the outcome of what we are about to do or compromise our positions in any way. Both of us know where each other are at, at any time. We'll see what he wants to talk about. Did the message make any indication of what that would be?"

"No, sir. But I would imagine that it would have to do with truces to affect aid to the wounded, things of that nature. The message said 'terms of engagement'-like he wants to set the rules first before--"

"...the game begins," said the General, cutting him off. "It does seem a most civilized thing we can do before we end all our lives and the lives of those around us. Someone has to take the first step. Set it up, Colonel."

The sun shone brightly and directly overhead as both command vehicles proceeded as planned to the designated coordinates. The dust that got kicked up and trailed the two like dirty cyclones left little doubt as to their location and that they were on an apparent collision course.

The view from the news media's VTOL's over one thousand yards away showed two whirling clouds swiftly headed directly toward each other, their impact seemingly imminent. Just as that realization came to light, the two clouds stopped moving and they dissipated slowly upward into the air. Each vehicle was now becoming visible through the slowly disintegrating veils of red dust that moments before, were racing toward each other with what seemed like a boundless determination. Green smoke immediately appeared on the high ground on either side of the small valley in which these two machines had come to a standstill.

For what seemed like an eternity, there was no movement save for the colored smoke and red dust intermingling and blowing across the center of the point of no return. Occasionally, the two command vehicles would become completely engulfed and obscured, making viewing of any movement that might be taking place, difficult, though the two vehicles were only about one hundred yards apart. Then, without any warning, the right rear door on the Top Commander's car opened. The door to the General's Ramses II Command Vehicle opened as well just moments afterward. And as if coordinated by a given command, both men appeared and stood at the side of their respective rides, as if they each had just dismounted a cavalry steed.

Overhead, thousands of yards away, dozens of the news VTOL's were in the air vying for a good camera position. Long range lenses provided complete and total broadcast coverage even if it did have a shaky, grainy quality to it. Not even Man's first moon landing had a larger viewing audience. The entire world was watching. The media aircraft were kept at a distance with the threat of being shot from the sky. Heavily-armed combat drones from both sides encircled and hovered around the battle area, forming a tight circle in the sky hundreds of yards from their military leaders. The whirring sound of their fast electric rotors disrupted the otherwise quiet afternoon air, their unnatural man-made rhythm mixing with nature sounds all around them.

The two figures started out walking toward one another, their gazes fixed forward, their pace like that of an antiquated funeral procession walking behind a horse-drawn hearse. The scene was a familiar but surreal one, eerily imitative of old film or entertainment culture from decades long ago. The stage had intentionally been set to the demands of a Western culture-savvy 'director', the cameras placed to be the

eyes of the world, and the actors were in motion and improvising their roles as they went. And like any non-scripted event, no one knew what would happen next until it happened. But the ending to this would involve a massive viewing audience, everyone in the world.

As they walked, the two military leaders both cast their eyes fleetingly to the hills where the snipers were standing at attention, their unseen weapons lying on the ground at their feet. Green smoke blew across them, obscuring their presence and clearing for random moments, giving the rigid soldiers a ghost-like presence along the ridge.

More than once, each of the commanders glanced up at each other and then down at the ground, checking the path in front of him. One misstep, a trip over a rock, or a falter or fall to the ground could be interpreted as a silenced shot hitting one of them and would cause all hell to break loose immediately, condemning all those present to an instant death. And the rest of the world would undoubtedly follow in the days, weeks and months to come with loyalist factions from both sides wrecking havoc in the streets, vying for the last few remnants of usable fuel sources.

The General strained his eyes under the brim of his cap to get a glimpse of the oncoming figure. The sun was directly overhead, offering neither man a visual advantage or handicap. The General's dress uniform was well-fitting, and adorned with the many campaign ribbons and awards he had earned during the course of his long career in service to the military. It also felt uncomfortable being worn in the field under battle conditions. Was that the intention? And the shiny and colorful awards somehow seemed out of place in this dirty, natural setting. Completely covered in red dust, even his spit polished shoes would not now pass a routine inspection. With each step he took toward his enemy, his overall deportment was becoming more integrated with the surroundings, the visible records on his chest, his accomplishments, becoming more and more difficult to discern as the red dust settled on and clung to everything it touched.

Each step brought them closer together as they walked on the arid, dry ground. Under their feet lay the very thing for which they were willing to die. They would send their own troops to be buried in that same ground.

His opponent was smartly dressed in a similarly adorned dress tunic but with far fewer awards. As he got closer, the General could see that his hair was neatly trimmed, his cap straight and perfectly centered, his tie expertly knotted and closed up neatly to

his collar. The General could see his own reflection growing larger in the curved lenses of the Top Commander's yellow-mirrored sunglasses.

In the distance, The General could hear the faint chatter from several radios along with the ever-present soft chopping of the news aircrafts' large blades. The combat drones bobbed up and down in front of them marking an invisible perimeter in the sky hundreds of feet above the ground.

Just as the two leaders' steps brought them within talking distance of each other, a flock of blackbirds alighted en masse in the open field nearby. Their pointed beaks drilled repeatedly into the sun-hardened top layer of soil searching for something to eat. The two men were three paces apart when the General suddenly stopped. The Top Commander immediately responded in kind, and brought his feet together. He stiffened his posture and brought his hand to the brim of his cap in a swift and sharp salute, and held it there.

"Good afternoon, General," said the Commander.

The General returned his salute albeit more slowly. The Commander promptly released his and peeled off his sunglasses. The General watched as his doubled reflection slid off both lenses. The Commander carefully tucked them inside his dark grey tunic. His opponent's face was a familiar one and The General recognized it instantly. It was that of the captured soldier from the night before.

"Thank you for coming," said the Commander extending his right hand.

The General grasped the Commander's hand and shook it firmly. Their exchange of words lasted exactly ten seconds and then ended abruptly. The words that needed said, were. What needed done warranted no more discussion.

The two men stood facing each other for a few moments longer, then silently walked off the field together.

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