

SHATTER

"Right here should be fine," said the soldier to his spotter as he put his sniper rifle on his back. The small screen on his wrist illuminated the opaque-black visor on his helmet, indicating they were forty kilometers from their extraction point.

"I'll dig. You keep an eye out," said the spotter. He pulled from his belt a rod that extended into a shovel at the push of a button. He began digging.

The sniper kept his eyes on the horizon, viewing the color field of temperatures around him in the night forest. The trees showed up as a very faint blue, everything else as black, and no sign of any yellows or reds or oranges until he looked down at his spotter, still digging. "Lifeless," he said, tapping his helmet to switch his visor back to night-vision.

"You know where these seeds end up after they bring a squad back out here to retrieve them?" said the spotter.

"No. Don't they get sent to the agriculture department? You know, I don't see why they need to send someone back out here to get these seeds after we bury them. We could just bring them in ourselves."

"It's for our safety," replied the spotter, sinking his shovel deeper into the earth.

"I suppose. It's just more work, though."

"They send more than just *someone* out here to retrieve these after we have them secured. They send several fully-armed squads out. Nobody fucks with three choppers full of government troops. Now,

us—if any more than three insurgents catch us off-guard, chances are we'll be killed. If we have the seeds on us, they'll be taken, and we don't need to be reminded yet again how important these are to keep in the hands of our government."

A dead branch fell through the trees, and both soldiers jumped. Each of them pulled their rifles out and filtered through the views on their visors, looking in every which direction opposite of each other.

"See anything?" asked the spotter.

"Nothing."

"Just a branch." The spotter threw his gun on his back and went back to digging. The sniper kept his gun out and watched the horizon closely.

"What *does* happen to these seeds? They're planted, right?" asked the sniper.

"Oh, no," said the spotter. "Seeds *this* pure? No, these go in the vault. With these kinds of seeds, natural seeds, they could spread throughout the globe, becoming common and worthless."

"I've never had real corn before," replied the sniper.

"Neither have I. I hear it's delicious."

"We should really be growing it for ourselves. Not *us*, I mean. You know, I mean, the government. Synthetic food is so disgusting."

"Too much of a risk. One seed gets in the wrong hands, pretty soon you have a farm full of corn, then you have whole sections of the planet farming corn, the next day the whole world is eating it—including

the insurgents. The virus of '48 would have been for nothing."

The sniper walked away a little, still watching through the trees. "How old were you in 2048?" asked the sniper.

"Seven."

"You remember it? The virus?"

"Yeah. Don't you?"

"I was two."

"A lot of people died, but it was entirely necessary. It's genius if you ask me. Chaos... population gets out of control, you eliminate the one thing that everyone needs—sustenance, and keep a huge stash for yourself. Supply and demand. The virus killed off all edible plant life, in turn, a tremendous amount of animal life dies. Eventually the whole food chain crumbles. Your enemies die. Those that survive come begging to you for your food reserves. We control the food market, we control the world."

The spotter pulled from his pocket a small cloth, in it were a hundred or so bright-orange pieces of corn. He looked up at the sniper and said, "These seeds, once they're put in the vault, will make up a miniscule amount of the total number of seeds in the vault, far less than a thousandth of a percentage point." He repeated himself as he wrapped the seeds back up and put them into the hole, "Supply and demand."

"I think it's a waste," replied the sniper.

The spotter pushed the dirt back into the hole and covered it with leaves. "Done," he said, standing up. "Is your memory warmed up?"

The sniper pulled from his belt a small, disposable, global-positioning device. Displayed on it was the exact longitude of his position, the position of the seeds. The spotter pulled out a similar device.

Displayed on his device was the exact latitude of their position. They tossed the devices down, and the units began to smoke, dissolving into the air.

"Good," said the spotter. "Plan on staying alive?"

"Yeah," replied the sniper sarcastically. He added, "For today at least."

"This day's almost over."

The sniper ignored him, saying instead, "We've got forty kilometers to cover before sundown tomorrow. I'll take point, you get the rear, and we should be paying a visit to Bravo Camp by morning."

The spotter nodded.

The two men hurried off through the woods.

"An army marches on its stomach, Lyra."

"I know," she said, replying to the image of the old man on the view screen on her forearm. She lay on her back in the grass, a short inclined hill that provided her with a small amount of cover.

"We don't *expect* you to be successful. We *need* you to be successful."

"I know," she replied again.

"In a few months, this coming summer, those seeds will mean everything to our forces. Give it three years, and we'll have farms across half the country."

"I know."

"You're tired," said the man on the view screen. "We all are, but we're all here. We're pushing ourselves just as you are. You have all of us at your disposal. You need to keep moving."

She rolled over and crawled up the hill a ways. She peered over the top. Ahead of her, shining bright in the moonlight, was a forest.

"Satellite imagery shows a single Shatter unit, sniper and spotter, exiting those woods, well out of the way of their estimated extraction point and the only army camp that's been set up in the vicinity. We are almost a hundred-percent sure they've hid the seeds there."

"Any word from the victims?"

"Several agents arrived there an hour ago. It was just a civilian, no political alliances that we know of, growing the corn in his basement for his family. They're still searching the place. They won't find anything. Shatter soldiers haven't left a seed behind in the past."

"When will I be able to reach them?"

"Unfortunately you'll come in contact with them after sun up. This is at a sprinting pace. You should have enough battery power in your suit to secure the Shatter soldiers, *alive*, and have just enough left over to perform the interrogation. We just need those two coordinates, Lyra."

"Understood."

"Now run."

Lyra took off down the hill and into the forest, her suit contracting and expanding in just the right places all over her body to make her run faster and breathe deeper throughout the night.

"It was uncalled for Rothhammer. A simple bullet would have done," said the sergeant as he took his place near the fire. A red sun was rising over Bravo Camp and the five men that maintained it.

"What? Come on," replied Rothhammer, sitting opposite his sergeant at the fire. "A long time ago, the Vikings... they used to ransack towns and throw babies onto *pitchforks*."

"The last time I checked, we're not Vikings," replied the sergeant. "We're

government soldiers." The sergeant pulled out the magazine from his assault rifle and began to clean it. "Our positions require us to have at least some amount of dignity, however small that amount may be. We find insurgents, we put them through the two-minute tribunal, and then we execute them by firing squad. *That's* the procedure."

"The two-minute tribunal is such a waste of time," said another soldier sitting at the fire. "The insurgents always receive the same verdict. They're always executed."

"It's not our job to question the procedure, gentlemen," replied the sergeant. "It's our job to make sure the procedure is adhered to. That means quick deaths for every man, woman, and child that supports or is suspected of supporting the guerilla movement."

The sergeant jumped, dropping his gun. Something had been thrust in the back of his head.

"Bang," said a voice from behind him. Everyone looked except for the sergeant, who tried to remain very still. "I've just doused this fire with the insides of your skull, Sergeant. That's not a very good perimeter you folks have set up if we can just pass through it now, is it?"

The sergeant put his hands down and rolled his eyes. He knew who had snuck up on him. "Our perimeter isn't meant to keep out Shatter units. It's meant to keep out peasants with machine guns."

The spotter stepped over to a place by the fire and had a seat. He looked at the soldiers, some of them snickering, chuckling to themselves. "You think that's funny?" asked the spotter. The soldiers stopped laughing. "You won't be laughing uncontrollably when my sniper takes all four of your heads clean off within a matter of seconds."

The sniper stepped out from behind a tent. His appearance startled some of the soldiers. He sat down with them at the fire and took his helmet off.

"Private Allen!" shouted the sergeant to one of his soldiers. "It looks like you've been keeping a good eye on our sensors."

"Sir? They've been disabled, sir."

"A warning would have been nice. Would that have been too much to ask?" sarcastically questioned the sergeant.

"No, sir. Sorry, sir."

"What are you still doing here, Private?"

"Sir?"

"Get out there and get those sensors going again!" yelled the sergeant.

"You know," said the spotter, "not all of the insurgents are peasants with guns."

"Is that so?" said the sergeant.

"It's so," replied the spotter. "We've been attacked before by a few of them. They tracked us and bugged us. They carried some strange less-than-lethal weapons... hallucinogenic sedatives. And they had some optics unlike anything we use—normal night vision, sure, but then they could also see electro-magnetic frequencies and the slightest hint of movement from tens of kilometers away."

"Did they ever get to any of you?" asked Rothhammer.

"To other units, yes," said the spotter.

"Only a few," added the sniper. "That's why we don't carry the seeds with us. We hide them—for good, too, if either of us dies. They'll need both of the coordinates we've remembered. They'll need us alive." The sniper pulled from his pack a small package of food which he began to eat.

"While you guys are out roaming from village to village killing everyone who looks at you funny, every day, we're making sure that seeds don't fall into the hands of insurgents. We're keeping the amount of people you end up killing minimal. We're keeping them starved and weak so they can't fight back. You guys are just grunts—we're the most hated operatives on the planet."

"Yeah, yeah," said the sergeant sarcastically. "We've heard all about how much better the elite Shatter soldiers are. Every damn one of you who comes through here likes to lay it on us thick. You guys are just recon—you're runners with big guns that you never get to fire." The sergeant put the clip he had been wiping back in his gun. "We're the ones in the trenches. We're right on the front lines here. You walk ten clicks south and you'll get yourself shot by a dozen guerillas before you know they've even got you in their sights." He put a bullet in the chamber. "Do you realize your job could be done with a simple radio? Just call the coordinates of your seeds in. That's all you need to do."

The spotter laughed. "You know," he began. The sergeant fully expected some sort of comeback, but the spotter changed the subject instead. "Your boy's been gone for quite a while now."

The sergeant sighed and shook his head. "Romero?"

"Sir?" replied a soldier.

The spotter looked at the sniper. The sniper put his food down and put his helmet back on.

"What's Allen's status?"

"Well, he's still alive, sir," replied Romero, looking at the computer screen near his seat next to the fire. He chuckled a bit.

"What do you see, Romero?"

"Oh," said Romero, still laughing a little. "His vitals are very good. Only thing is: he may have turned into a woman. His testosterone levels are off."

Everyone laughed, easing some tension that had been building up in the past few minutes. "Well," said the sergeant, "knowing Allen, he's probably..."

Just then the spotter started to convulse uncontrollably. As he fell over forward into the fire, his hand pulled the trigger again and again, shooting several rounds into a fellow soldier.

"Oh, shit!" yelled the sergeant. "Get cover!"

Romero fell out off his seat and crawled over to the soldier that had been shot by the spotter. He was dead. Large, cauterized holes had been blasted through the soldier's body.

The sergeant grabbed the spotter and drug him out of the fire. As he got up, his assault rifle in hand, he was startled by the figure of a woman in a black bodysuit. He had no time to react. A loud bang deafened him and an accompanying flash blinded him. He was firing his weapon in the direction of the figure, or so he thought, but he was also getting hit in the face, neck, and chest repeatedly with punches and kicks. The gun was ripped from his hands, and he was shot in the back, but not by the woman.

The sniper had missed. Lyra jumped behind a tent. The sniper kept firing, turning on his thermal vision, but the fire was too bright. He continued to fire at the faint wisp of warm colors behind the tent. His gun started to beep. He had one shot left. In front of him stood Lyra, Romero in front of her as a hostage, forced to point his pistol at the sniper.

"Shoot her!" yelled Romero, getting choked by her strong grip. She quickly shoved him toward the sniper, and the sniper fired through Romero. The sniper threw his gun on his back as Romero fell to the ground, pulling out his pistol instead.

"Hey!" he yelled. He was watching Rothhammer run out into the field, away from the camp. "Help!" He brought his pistol up and looked around. He tapped his helmet, but switched to night vision on accident. "No!" He ripped off his helmet and threw it to the ground. He turned. She was right there.

She kicked the pistol out of his hand, shoved her hand in his face, and stabbed him in the neck with a needle. He fell over backwards, jerking uncontrollably with terrible convulsions.

Rothhammer was still running. She stepped over to the fire, pulled the rifle out of the spotter's shaking hand, and fired a single round into the field. Rothhammer stopped, looked down at the large hole in his stomach, and collapsed to the ground.

"Oh, God!" yelled the sniper, regaining consciousness in the darkness. "Fuck!" His hands and legs were bound to some sort of iron support beam. He was in an old, rotting house. There was a figure in the doorway.

He closed his eyes and lay down on the floor. He said to her, "Why the fuck do you even bother, you sons of bitches? God!"

Lyra stepped into the room. "We're hungry. That's why."

"Just fuck off."

"We have as much right to eat as you do."

"If you'd stop trying to kill us, you could have all the food you want."

"And suffer under the laws of your government?"

The sniper laughed. "You've gotta weigh your options: freedom or food? Personally I want to eat and live. That's just me."

"Some people want to do more than just live. Speaking of which, your partner decided it was in his best interest not to. He actually begged me to kill him."

"You bitch!" he yelled. He shook his head. He realized what this meant. "Now you're really fucked." He laughed. "He's the only one that knew the precise latitude of the place we hid the seeds, and you just killed him."

"He begged me to kill him because he inadvertently revealed the latitude. Did you know about his poor memory? He had the latitude written on the palm of his hand."

The sniper's face turned white. "Fuck!" he yelled, jerking his hands up and down the pole he was bound to. "Damn it! I told him to stop doing that... I fucking told him..."

"That's alright, though. Isn't it?" Lyra asked. "You won't reveal the longitude, will you?"

"Hell no."

"Good, then the seeds are hidden forever. Unless... I shared with you the latitude—then you'd be the only one in the whole world who knows where they're hidden. Do you know the kind of credits they'd give you for those seeds?"

"Fuck off, lady."

"At least a few billion. Don't you think?" She crouched down near him. He backed away. "I know all the right people that could get you that kind of money. We've got hackers and crackers that know your government's systems better than your

government does. Two billion tax credits can disappear and end up in your account, unnoticed, untraceable." She reached down and wiped some blood from his cut lip. "You could get yourself a home on one of those tropical islands that weren't affected by the virus. Pay the natives a credit a piece to build it. Take a beautiful girl with you." She smiled. "Live the rest of your life as far away from this civil war as you can get."

The sniper gulped. He looked into her eyes, and she continued to smile. "Deal," he said nervously.

Her smile turned into a smirk.

"But you have to show me you can deliver." He sat up and rested against the pole. "I want to see that you can get me the credits."

"We will. You just have to tell me where your ID tag is."

He shook his head. "No, I can... I can give you my account number. That will be enough."

"It won't," she said. She stood up and walked over to a workbench in the corner. Her equipment was scattered about. She flipped on a light to see. "That may be enough in government territory, but we don't have immediate access to the government's systems. It's a lot more complicated than entering in an account number." She pulled from the bench a long metallic device. "Where is it?"

"Fine," he said.

She walked over to him and crouched down. A light at the end of her device blinked on.

"It's hidden under my arm."

She stuck him with the device. He screamed, trying his best to pull away. She removed the device, ripping bloody bits of his flesh along with it. On the end of the

device, held by the small orb of light, was a metallic sphere.

"Thanks," she said, smiling.

"What the fuck?!" he screamed. "I thought you were gonna scan the damn thing. You ripped it out?! How the hell am I supposed to get back into the city?"

"Well," she replied, getting up and going back over to the workbench, "if I were telling the truth, it wouldn't have mattered. A Shatter soldier turned smuggler can't go back to his home."

"What?!"

"You might not know this, but your government uses your ID tags to track your every movement. If the ID tag is processed, it can return every place you'd been since it was implanted."

"Wha...? You don't need me... after all?" Devastated, he looked at her, watching her download his tracks.

She turned to him and said, "No. I never needed you." And from the darkness, a muzzle flash, her pistol in her lap, pointed right at him. He collapsed back down on the floor. He tried to cover the wound on his chest with his hands, but realized his hands were still bound to the pole. He looked up. She was still there, at her computer, watching the results of the processing. It was as though he wasn't even there, dying right there. He died alone.

"I have the seeds secured and I am en route to the extraction point!" yelled Lyra into the communication device on her arm. She was running from the forest as fast as her suit could assist her to run.

"Lyra," replied the old man on the view screen. "Stop running, dear."

She slowed down and caught her breath for a moment. "What? Why?"

"I've got some bad news," the old man said somberly.

"What is it?"

"The seeds... Our agents did some tests on the soil the plants were growing in... It was radiated."

Moments ago she had won after a long battle.

"The seeds are poison," said the old man. "They're worthless."

The battle is never really over.

"Lyra? Are you okay?"

The war goes on.

"Are you still there?"

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