Echoes of Supporia

A story from the Milspur Archives

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A Patch of Grass

"This is an official broadcast from the Senate: Hello, this is Speaker Rsteon. Supporians, I come to you with horrific news."
–Supporian capitulation broadcast.

My feet make a rhythmic splash as I rush through the streets. The wind pulls at my jacket. The rain finds a way in.

My home emerges through the rain. Dry. Warm. Happy. I run up the steps. My foot gives way. My stomach drops. My knee hits the pavement. My briefcase bursts open. A golden object slips from my hand. It rolls across the pavement before disappearing into the grass. My knees scrape as I scramble after it. Picking up the ring, I watch it slide gently down my finger. It's always been a little big. A cold, wet sensation drips down my arm. There's a dark seam in my jacket. Shuddering from the cold, I try to pick up some papers. Most tear. I can see my hand through others. The important names and numbers blur into the same indifferent blotches. I toss them aside.

My hands tremble from the cold. The key won't find the lock. I try again, and again, before it finally finds the lock. I begin twisting the key. There's a click. Wind flies over me, throwing the door open. The door makes a loud bang as I throw myself against it. As my eyes adjust to the warm light in my home, Amya, my wife, is laughing. She is standing there holding a book. Probably an advanced one. She has always read things I can't follow. When she laughs, I laugh. But not today.

Amya walks over and hugs me. "What happened?"

Shaking my head, I let out a hollow laugh. “I dealt with idiots all day. One captain wanted to sail back out into the storm; he said something about *late shipments*. When I told him that we couldn’t allow that, he cursed at me. He then kept complaining, just nonstop; he couldn’t just leave me alone.”

I let out a sigh. “To make things worse, on my way home, my umbrella blew away. Then, as I got home, I tripped, tore my rain jacket, ruined a good briefcase, and destroyed all of the stuff from work.”

Amya gently grabs my soaking wet jacket and quietly studies it. Once her fingers find the tear, she fidgets with it for a second. “That captain…” She puts my jacket on a hanger. “Did he look scared or stressed?”

I frown. “Stressed? Yeah?” I get lost in her stare.

“Do you remember what he was shipping?”

I pause. “I think it was a shipment of amethyst. I could *check* if my papers weren't **destroyed by the storm**.”

Amya sighs. “People do stupid things when they are stressed. Especially if it’s amethyst. The shortage has gotten worse.”

The joyful gleam in her eyes slowly fades. We stare at each other for a moment. A clock ticks in the background. Amya breaks the silence. “But that's an issue for tomorrow. We’ve had a bad enough day today. Let's go eat dinner.”

I follow her to the kitchen. “Did you over-season the chicken again?”

She laughs. “I never over-season the chicken! You just don't know what flavor is.” The savory smell of dinner gets stronger as I get closer.

“*Hey, Eston.”* A radio crackles in my ear. *“You good? You've been staring at that same patch of grass for a few minutes now.”*

The savory smell is gone. “Yeah, I'm fine, just... Yeah, I’m fine.” Why couldn't they let me stay in my memories?

“Well, pull it together. We need to make sure our ‘friend’ makes it safe and sound.”

The Friend

"At approximately 1200 today, Ameicofean forces overwhelmed the defensive perimeter around Asan."
–Supporian capitulation broadcast

A jolt destroys my dreams. It pulls me from the fantasy. I had a family. A wife. Two kids. The plane vibrates rhythmically. My eyes feel heavy. Another jolt keeps my dreams away. I can't see anything. I hate not being able to see.

I still remember that dull slap as he hit the ground. We have been together since birth. He was shot mid-fall. This could be my last day remembering him.

Nerves are bad. So is excitement. And I don't feel excited.

Cold air fills my lungs. If I die, I die. Nothing I can do about it. I will likely die here. If not today, definitely later. I exhale.

Via. Aquilea's rallying cry. Sacrifice for freedom. Freedom and sacrifice. Many say *via* for Aquila. For me, it is *via* for all. I must not stray until the time comes.

Red floods the cabin. The seatbelt makes a click as it opens. Putting on my fall-pack, I nearly fall backwards. I struggle to walk forward. It feels like a sack of bricks. My goggles feel cold on my face. I am ready.

The back of the cabin opens. Wind whistles as it comes in. I walk towards the edge. Everything seems distant. I look back at my commander. He gives me a nod. I breathe in. Breathe out. And let go.

I’m weightless, like I'm in the stars. It’s always peaceful during a fall. I close my eyes and feel the ground approaching. It's far away, but coming closer. I can feel the faint pulse of the fall-pack, and I force my heartbeat in line. It’s waiting calmly for me, just as I am waiting patiently for the ground.

It’s closer now. I can feel the trees and the birds in their leaves. It’s peaceful. Not at peace. Like a land awaiting a storm. Breathe in, breathe out.

The ground is closer now. I pull a string on my fall-pack, and I feel myself decelerating. I land as gently as a feather and as silently as a thought.

Garacof

"After a period of urban warfare, the Ameicof forces delivered this ultimatum [paper crinkles]:"
–Supporian capitulation broadcast

Just as I finish hiding my fall-suit and fall-pack, a man emerges from the forest. It's very dark. Impossible to see anything in detail. I tense up, "Who's there?"

The figure replies in Supporian, "Relax. Welcome to Garacof, the capital of Ameicof!"

Still shaken, I shout out, "What's your name?"

The figure responds, "I'm Eston Valya. What is your name?"

The tension slips away. I recognize that name. It was in my briefing. "I'm Jeon Olen."

Eston walks towards me. "What a pleasant place to meet a man like you," Eston says with a hint of sarcasm, "but we need to go, we can't wait till we get caught here. Did you hide your stuff?" He quickly scans the shadows around us, then whispers, "Every second counts."

I whisper back, "Yes, of course."

Eston scans the forest one more time before saying, "Let's go."

I follow Eston through the forest; he moves as though it is not there. I, on the other hand, struggle in the unknown, pitch-black darkness.

We emerge into a city lit by harsh fluorescent lights. It seems prosperous, almost comfortable. On second glance, that impression fades away. Storefronts are boarded up and covered in propaganda. Homeless sleep in every alleyway. And checkpoints sit at every major intersection.

The farther we weave through the city, the more issues become apparent. Posters and lifeless paintings decorate the streets and empty storefronts. One has the phrase “prosperity and security” neatly displayed in the middle. Another proudly displays a soldier saving a puppy from a tank. After passing more posters, we reach the city's empty, beating heart. Eston ducks into an alleyway. I follow him until we stop at a doorway. Eston knocks on the door two quick times, followed by three long knocks. The door makes a faint creak, and a man emerges from the inside, scans us carefully, nods, and then steps aside.

After entering the building and following a winding hallway, we emerge in a nerve center. People in Supporian military and civilian clothing rush around, and the sound of radio chatter and boots fills the air. A Supporian flag hangs triumphantly in the corner. Next to it hangs a yellow and red regimental flag, with the words 103rd Supporian Legionnaires proudly displayed on it. After observing the scene, a group of partisans finally take notice of me.

Eston takes this as an opportunity and shouts, “Here's the Aquilean operative! Let's give him a warm welcome into the capital of our occupiers!”

The Official

"Senate of Supporia. We request an unconditional surrender. If you choose to refuse this request, military high command will authorize the use of excessive force against civilian and military populations. For the good of your people, stop this bloodshed. You have 2 hours to respond."

–Supporian capitulation broadcast

The alarm clock blares in my ears. It wakes me up from a very comfortable and enjoyable dream. I was taking a reprieve on the coast. Far away from work. My children were playing, and my wife relaxed in a lawn chair. The seagulls flew overhead, and the waves gently pounded the sand. But my schedule had to ruin things. I have no desire to attend the meeting today. Nothing ever gets done. Rolling over, I try to find an excuse to stay in bed. Maybe the alarm clock will magically stop? Of course it doesn't. I fumble with the alarm clock in the darkness before finally finding the silence button.

I let it ring too long. It wakes my wife up. She is groggy, but still manages to mumble, "Have a good day at work."

I let out an unenthusiastic chuckle, "I'll try." She then promptly rolls over and falls back asleep.

I force myself to stand up and try to find the bathroom. After following the wall, I fumble around until I find the light switch. The lights are painfully bright. I flinch back and try to force my eyes open.

As my eyes slowly adjust, I instinctively move through my morning routine. I put my wedding ring on. It slides down my finger for a second before settling. It's always been a little big. I hesitate and look down at my uniform. It seems heavier today.

I sneak out of the room, making sure not to wake my wife, and head towards my study. I then review some documents and notes from the last uneventful meeting, and finish packing my briefcase. I quickly brew some coffee and make some toast. The toast has a welcoming smell. I stuff it in my mouth and rush out of the house.

Despite walking the whole way, I barely notice the commute. It's practically muscle memory at this point; there's no need to pay attention. This is Garacof, the capital of Ameicof. It's safe here.

After a relatively short walk, I arrive at the military's headquarters, an old congressional building from before the constitutional crisis. Its architecture is fittingly flamboyant, with stunning and intricate decorations along every wall. The flag of Ameicof sags from its flagpole due to the windless day, and a few guards in army uniforms stand next to the entryway.

I start to turn around. Maybe I could be sick? I abandon that thought. Walking toward the entrance, I return the guards' salute and push the doors open.

Again

"An ultimatum which we chose to accept. As of 1600 today, Supporia as a sovereign state no longer exists. As of 1600 today, Supporia is a province of Ameicof."

–Supporian capitulation broadcast

The meetings are incredibly boring. All the uniformed men talk about casualties, numbers, desperate economic plans, contingency plans, and contingency plans for the contingency plans. In other words, nothing new.

The room has not changed in months, not even the maps. The only change is the new propaganda posters, which seem more mundane than usual. The economic situation is worsening every day. Due to the war with Aquila, we have more numbers to argue about as other numbers get bigger.

Eventually, I stopped trying to pay attention. My pen is more novel than this meeting, so I take it apart, and put it back together, and do it again... and again...

"Len, as head secretary of internal affairs, what do you recommend we do?"

Oh no. I really should have been paying attention. I quickly look around the room for clues. Nothing. After sitting in silence, I cautiously respond, "We could perform some more geological surveys?" Hesitating again, I add, "The raids are going well. The Supporian resistance seems to be petering out."

Hopefully, one of those darts hits its mark. Everyone looks a little puzzled, but no one says anything, so I must have said something on topic. After another round of confused silence, they go back to discussing and arguing about what we discussed and argued about last week.

Eventually, the meeting ends, and we all exit. I make my way through the building and into my office. After throwing out my 'notes', I empty my briefcase and brew another coffee.

After sipping on my coffee for a while, my aide enters with a stack of papers. He pauses to salute, then asks, "How did the meeting go, sir?"

I put down my coffee. "Oston, you know how it goes. Same old stuff."

Oston pauses, looks down at the stack of papers he is holding, and then says, "Last week's raids resulted in 20 civilian casualties. They were successful in neutralizing some insurgent outposts. The local general is requesting permission to continue the raids; he is convinced they have found a large insurgent cell." Essentially the same report as last week.

I gesture towards the papers. "I take it that's what those are for." Oston nods and hands me the stack of papers.

There's plenty of legal jargon in the papers, but after reading so many identical requests, you learn what's important and what's fluff. Sighing, I look up at Oston and ask, "What's the total amount of civilian casualties from the raids?"

Oston looks surprised that I abandoned our usual routine. "I think 20,000 so far. But it's hard to say, the garrisons don't keep very accurate records. Even this week's collateral damage report is likely an estimate."

Twenty thousand. The print on the orders morphs into blotches. That's my entire hometown. "Do you ever get tired of it, Oston?"

Oston gives me a confused look. "About what, sir?"

I look at him. "The constant civilian deaths. Sometimes, it almost feels intentional."

Oston hesitates. A clock ticks impatiently in the background. He looks around the room. "No, I do not, sir. We are trying to reinforce stability. That's why the temporary president, Tenon, assumed office. Eventually, we will be able to grieve for those we have ordered to their deaths. But we can only do that once Ameicof is safe, secure, prosperous, and has a new constitution. Why this sudden change of heart, sir?"

We weren't even alive when that justification was first given. I look down at the papers. "It's just a lot of people, that's all." I sign the papers.

He takes a brief look and pauses before saying, "By the way, sir, there's another meeting tomorrow, at 1200 sharp. The temporary president will be there." He then salutes, wishes me a good day, and exits.

I sit around for a while reading the news; it's mostly feel-good stories. Iava, the director of information, has done an excellent job. She can't make people ignorant, but at least entertained. There's even a little story about an Ameicof soldier saving a cute little puppy from the front lines. It's entertaining and full of details. It helps ease my mind.

The light from my windows slowly dims as an evening storm rolls in. It gets dark enough that I need an extra light. Begrudgingly, I stand up from my mild session of escapism and walk over towards a lamp. As I switch on the lamp, there's an unusual tension in the pull string. It's not a big

difference, but it's there. It piques my curiosity. I begin taking the lamp apart. Upon further inspection, I notice a small bump near where the pull string attaches to the lamp, pinching the pull string slightly. It seems that something small has been shoved there.

My hands shake as I take apart the top of the lamp. What I'm left with is not good. There are some wires spliced into the lamp's wiring, with a small recorder and a microphone.

Someone has bugged my office. It was only a matter of time before they noticed my disinterest during meetings.

Removing this bug would bring into question my loyalty. If my loyalty is questioned, then my family would be questioned, and if my family is questioned—Is my house bugged? Was I not loyal enough?

I lock the door and begin rebuilding the lamp piece by piece, making sure to replace the bug exactly where it was.

After carefully reconstructing the lamp, I go back to distracting myself with the 'news'. Everything needs to seem normal. Some far-off thunder startles me. I can't stop shaking.

Meeting time

" Supporians, may you find strength to survive these dark times. And I'm sorry... goodbye."
–Supporian capitulation broadcast

Yesterday's evening storm has turned into a consistent, gloomy drizzle. Everyone is inside; people rush around the safe house. A few communications officers hunch over radios, reaching out to every legion in Supporia. Another warning. Another set of raids. Even after years, it never gets easier. Every time I hear the words "Ameicof" next to "raid," my heart aches.

I take the ring off my finger and look at it. It feels bigger now. Heavier. After all these years, why haven't I gotten it resized? I wish I could be with her.

Jeon enters behind me, quietly closes the door and stands beside me. He doesn't say anything; he doesn't need to. After standing with me for a while, he looks at me, then says, "She wouldn't want this."

No, she wouldn't.

He signed the order that killed her. He signed another yesterday. I compose myself. "No, I suppose she would not."

Jeon smiles back. He looks like he is about to say something but is interrupted by a communications officer bursting through the door. The officer looks around the room and then says, "Good morning, sirs. There's another Ameicofean meeting today, at 1200 sharp. The temporary president will be there."

Turning towards Jeon, I say, "I told you the lamp was in the right spot."

Jeon mumbles something and then nods. He pauses and looks around the room. After failing to find a clock, Jeon asks the communications officer, “What time is it?”

The officer looks down at his watch and then says, “1050, sir.”

Jeon looks at me. “They will have a secure room. We can listen using a listening device, but we need a line of sight.”

I nod. “We should go alone. Too many people might draw attention. We should probably leave now.”

Jeon looks at the map of the city for a second, probably memorising our route, then leaves to go grab the gear.

We reach the building roughly twenty minutes early. We scout out the area for a second, then reconvene. Just before we get into position, Jeon grabs my shoulder. “Don't try to avenge her. I’ve been there. It won’t change anything.” He then rushes off to get into position. I fidget with my gear, then move into position.

It’s still raining, and my socks are wet, but the anticipation allows me to forget. I check the clock tower—ten minutes till twelve—and set up the listening device. After about a minute, I grab my rifle, inspect it, and position it. Five minutes till twelve. Everyone’s already in the meeting room. Another minute passes. Then another.

A man in an army uniform rounds the corner. He is well-groomed and in his forties. He carries his briefcase like I used to. As he approaches the Army headquarters, the man stops. I steady my aim. He starts walking up the steps but trips. Papers burst from his briefcase, making a quiet slap on the wet steps. A golden object shoots out of his hand. It's a ring. A wedding ring. He

scrambles all over the place trying to find it. He completely ignores the documents that are scattered around him.

After finding the ring, he gently picks it up and sits down on the step, observing it. My breath fogs up the scope. Rain drips into my eyes as time slows, and I click the safety off.

He slides his ring down his finger. It seems a little loose. As I steady my aim, my ring begins to slip. I catch it. My grip tightens. My finger rests on the trigger. Rain pounds against the stone. A savory smell drifts from an apartment below.

The rain seems distant. My vision blurs. I blink. The curtains. The couch. Even the feel of the floor. I take a deep breath. I'm home.

There's a bitter smell. But it's comforting. It's coming from the kitchen. Amya must have over-seasoned the chicken again. She always did that.

"Where have you been?"

"I should have been with you."

The smell drifts away. The house fades. The cold of the steel returns. My wedding ring rests firmly against my skin. I hear the safety click back on. The man stands. He walks inside. I lie here and let the rain fall.