The Journey

A story from the Milspur Archives

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Orders

The snow is cold, and the mud is suffocating. They work together.

The snow invades your upper layers, making everything soggy before freezing. The mud coats your socks and pants, then freezes. The helmet ensures your head stays cold, and your gloves do little to keep your hands warm. The long watches slowly wear you down, especially the night watches. All we do is wait.

Wait for orders.

Wait for the enemy.

Wait in the trench.

Wait in the bunkers.

Nothing ever happens; nobody is crazy enough to attack through the mountains. If it's miserable with a permanent shelter, it must be even worse without one.

Occasionally, somebody needs artillery support, or a small unit makes its way through the mountain passes. That keeps you vigilant, but it’s still just a lot of waiting. So we play cards, tell stories, and talk about home.

Most of us have families. We all miss them. I miss my kids' laughter and my wife's smile. I can’t wait for this war to be over.

It's especially cold. The thermometer reads -11. I can see my breath turn to ice when I exhale. Of course, I got the night watch. My gloves crinkle whenever I flex my hand. I don't expect

anyone tonight. Who in their right mind would travel through the mountains in the winter? It's dark and cloudy, and I don't even have the stars for company.

My mind begins to drift; my eyelids droop, my vision blurs, and my breathing slows. Just as I teeter on the edge of consciousness, I hear a crunch. I snap awake, grab my weapon, and scan the darkness. A figure is slowly walking toward me. I call out, "Who's there?"

A feeble voice responds, "Supporian courier. I... have a message."

I lower my weapon and approach him. As I get closer, the details become clear. The courier wears a tattered Supporian military uniform bearing the insignia of a staff sergeant. A bloody bandage covers his right arm, and he clutches a letter in his left hand. A patch identifies him as serving on the Mirlandish front, perhaps 200 miles away—probably more.

When I reach him, he manages a feeble salute. "Orders from... General Quen." Then he collapses into the cold snow. I quickly take the letter and check his pulse; he is still alive.

After bringing him to the doc, I finally shift my attention to the envelope in my hands. It's soggy, crinkled, and stained. It looks more worn than the man who carried it.

Why did it need to travel from so far away? Why couldn't they just use the radio? I should probably take it to the commander—but it wouldn't hurt to see what's inside.

I look around and carefully break the seal. Inside is a single, neatly folded sheet of paper, yellowed by the elements, with ink bleeding through in places. I carefully unfold the letter.

This can't be real. This is some cruel joke.

I read it again; I must have missed something:

Ameicof forces have overrun the Eastern defenses; our government has capitulated and agreed to the Ameicof terms. All remaining and willing Supporian forces are to consolidate along the Mirland border around VillOnt for rendezvous with the Mirlandish partisans.

Sincerely, General Soen Quen

I… What?

A few moments later, I stand there as my commander reads and re-reads the order. He slowly becomes a sickly white. My eyes begin to wander. A picture of my commander with his family hangs happily on the wall next to a map. It's a map of our home. Supporia. Next to it is our flag. Or was, still is? I don't know. I hope my commander has an idea.

He stops reading the letter and looks at the map. “When do you think it happened?”

“A few months ago, maybe. It can’t have been too long.”

His gaze shifts to the photograph of his family. “What do you think I should tell them?” He pauses. “The troops, I mean. Do we go?”

Why is he asking me? I’m just a soldier. “Just tell them something.”

He stands and puts on his army cap. “Tell everyone to meet in the mess hall in twenty minutes.”

I snap to attention and salute. “Yes, sir.”

He looks me up and down. “Relax, man. There is no more army. I’m no longer your CO.”

I hold the salute. All these years… for it to end like this? Slowly, I lower my hand. I nod and leave the room.

The corridors of dull concrete are as indifferent as they are cold. The winding maze gives us protection, but never comfort. I find the communications center, where the faint crackle of idle radios makes the silence feel even heavier. John, the communications officer, peeks out from behind an oversized computer. His stupid smile looks as out of place as ever. “Hi! How ya doin’, Went?”

“I—I’m doing fine. How about you?”

His smile falters. “I’m doin’ great. The radios have been oddly quiet for a while, though. Know anything about that?”

I shrug. “Can you get on the intercom and tell everyone to meet in the mess hall in twenty minutes?”

“Sure thing. Can I ask why?”

“You’ll find out soon enough.”

He glances toward the door, then his smile returns. “All right!”

Once I step out of the comms room, John’s voice crackles over the intercom. “Good… morning, everyone. All units, assemble in the mess hall at… 0520.”

The fluorescent lights cast pitch-black shadows against the worn concrete, but the bare walls hold nothing except my own. The hallways feel lonely. Hundreds of people live here, yet the only sounds are distant conversations, my footsteps, and the buzz of the lights.

I turn left, then right, then right again. Eventually, the elevator comes into view—a ragged old thing that looks as if it belongs on a construction site. I slide open the door, step inside, and press the worn button marked 4.

The elevator shudders and begins its descent. Each time it passes a floor, the darkness flashes white, then returns. As the elevator slows, the voices below grow louder—hundreds of people talking over one another. From what I can hear, I am the only one who knows what has happened.

The mess hall is crowded. Some people wear uniforms, some wear sleepwear, and some wear a mixture of both. A few sit with friends; others sit alone. Everyone waits—not quietly, but waits.

The commander emerges from the elevator alone, without his usual aide. The room falls silent. He walks to the left side of the hall and removes his cap. "Good morning."

"Good morning, sir," we answer. The words echo through the concrete maze before the room falls silent again.

"I bet you're all wondering why I called you here at this ungodly hour."

No one responds. The commander clears his throat. "We just received a, uh… message from a general. General Quen, to be exact."

Murmurs spread through the hall. He takes the envelope from his pocket, carefully removes the order, and puts on his reading glasses. "It's short, but… I'll read it to you."

He coughs softly and takes a deep breath. "Ameicof forces have… overrun the Eastern defenses, and… our government has capitulated and agreed to their terms. All remaining… and

willing… Supporian forces are to consolidate along the Mirlandish border around… VillOnt for rendezvous with the Mirlandish partisans. Sincerely, General Soen Quen."

The commander returns the order to its envelope and removes his glasses. When he looks up, we can only stare back at him.

"It… has been an honor, but I think I'll go home now." He puts his cap back on. "If you want to go, please do. Nothing is keeping us here."

Morning

My bunkmate wakes me at 0700, as usual. It has been a day since we received the order, but Kaleb doesn't smile or try to scare me awake with some strange noise. He barely mumbles, "Morning."

No one knows what to do. Some say we should follow the order. Others want to wait until summer, while a few are already going home.

Kaleb has no one to go home to. His girlfriend left him for someone back home, and his mother died in the bombings. Still, he always seemed happy, or at least tried to be. He would joke about the weather, a sergeant's lisp, the bunker...anything. Usually, he and John are like two peas in a pod.

After waking me, Kaleb leaves without another word. I sit for a moment, then make my bed, pull on my uniform, and step into the concrete corridor. The cafeteria isn't far, but the silence makes the walk feel strangely short.

When I arrive, the room is quieter than usual.

The room is full, but empty. There's no laughter or loud conversation, only whispers. Kaleb and John sit in a corner, speaking quietly. Both of their uniforms are wrinkled, and Kaleb's rank is crooked.

I skip the unusually short food line, grab a coffee, and make my way over to them. John looks at me for a moment. "Well, I see you're still followin' the handbook."

I let out a single laugh. “Mind if I sit here?”

Kaleb nods, and I take the empty seat.

I look at both of them. “What are you guys talking about?”

They glance at each other before Kaleb mumbles, “What do you think?”

John sighs. “Neither of us has anybody to go back to… Well, I have my younger brother, but other than that… I guess we—we’re tryin’ to figure out if we should follow the order.”

John looks down at the table. “We’ve been here for a long time, Went. We’ve followed our orders and waited. We’ve defended Supporia. But now there is no Supporia. We can’t decide if it's worth it to keep fighting.” He pauses and looks at me. “What about you? Do you have anyone? What do you think about all of this?”

I take a sip of my coffee. It's still too hot and burns my tongue. “Yeah, I have a family back home. A wife and two boys… I want to go home, but it feels wrong. It’s an order. Something tells me we—I should follow it.”

Kaleb nods while John just keeps looking at me. Kaleb glances toward the food line. “Either way, we need to leave soon. I think everyone knows that. There's no logi crew to keep us supplied anymore. I don’t know the numbers, but apparently we only have a week of rations left. I mean… it’s been at least two months since the last resupply.”

John looks down and pokes at his mashed potatoes. “That would explain why they’re servin’ dinner for breakfast.”

The sting in my tongue fades as a colder thought settles over me. We’re stranded in the mountains, and winter is closing in. It’s a miracle the courier reached us at all.

Kaleb looks at me. “You should probably get some food before the rations run out…or before we leave.”

Before I stand up, Lieutenant Olson walks up to us. His uniform is still crisp, and his shoes are still polished. He pauses for a moment and looks at the three of us expectantly. After a moment, he sighs. “Good morning, corporals.”

He looks at John. “I'm trying to get a meeting together so we can decide what to do. Make an announcement over the intercom telling everyone to meet here at 1100.”

John stares at him, then shrugs. “Alright.”

Olson looks confused. “Well… carry on, then. I’ll see you all at 1100.”

He makes a crisp turn and walks off.

To be continued…

Went and his fellow corporals must make a decision that will change the course of their lives.