



# Redsector Blues

The crack of a bat split the summer haze, for a brief moment. A cheer went up among the small crowd, though they were still somewhat packed around the front-most seats. The sound was muffled, almost, by the noon day sun, and the lazy buzzing of a Sunday afternoon gently returned as children's cleats ran around the bases. Charlie sat further away from the front row seats. He was up in the shade of the old presenter's box, slowly sipping on a canteen of ice-cold water. Just water these days. He watched a blob of blonde hair make it to second, then third. Another cheer went up as he came home. Charlie listened to the buzzing of the cicadas, the dry rustling of the grass. He slowly breathed out.

A shadow fell across his face. He opened his eyes and squinted at the intrusion. An older man, thin silver hair clinging to the sides of his head, wiped a sheen of sweat from his mottled skin. He had a friendly expression on his face, the brown suit he wore damp in places. He was slightly out of breath from climbing the bleacher stairs, and set down the thin briefcase he carried as soon as he reached Charlie. It sets down with a thud. He breathlessly nodded at Charlie. "Mr. Hampton? You're a hard man to find." Charlie took another long pull of his water. He didn't offer any to the man, and screwed the lid shut before replying. "Yeah, well. I'm not exactly hiding." The old man took this as an invitation to sit down, which he did gladly. He groaned as he did, moving slowly and painfully. "Whoo! Gettin too old for field work. Well, my body is. Minds got an appetite for it still. Tough thing to reconcile, reality and the heart."

He wiped more sweat off his face, which did nothing to reduce the sheen that persisted despite the old man's best efforts. Charlie didn't say anything. He kept his eyes on the game, on that blonde bob of hair. It had gone back to the dugout, talking to its friends and gesturing around in excitement. It was a good day for him. "Now Charlie, you must imagine why I'm here. Well, let me tell you." Arthritic fingers popped open the briefcase. Inside there were a thin stack of papers inside a manilla folder. "As you know, you're one of the only men or women to escape the, eh, misfortune that Commander Rhyhan- sorry, General Reserve Commander Rhyhan, oversaw. One hell of a demotion, I'll tell you what. Justice does sometimes get its due, eh?" The old man searched Charlie's face for a reaction. With nonforthcoming, he cleared his throat and continued. "We've gotten-" Charlie interrupted him. "Who's we?" The old man blinked. "I'm sorry?"

Charlie moved his gaze from the field, staring directly at his interrogator. "Who. Is we?" The old man stuttered for a moment. "Uh, we, as in, the U.S. Army's Internal Investigative



Service, Section 9.” He reached inside his damp suit and produced a shiny badge with AIS stamped proudly on it. Charlie inspected it for a moment. “Hm.” He leaned back into the shade of the presenter box. The man bumbled putting the badge back into his suit, fingers not quite dexterous to manage it smoothly. Completely harmless. The old man started again. “Anyhoo, I’ve been sent out here to get the breakdown from the men on the ground on what happened, you know, from the horse’s mouth. We’ve got a lot of conflicting reports, see, a whole lot of rumor and hearsay so I’d like to ask you a few questions and see if we can’t get that cleared up.” He looked up from his manilla papers. “It’s very important, Charlie. We need to know what happened in Redsector.”

He gently tapped a ballpoint pen against the top of his briefcase. “We need to know who General Arlington is. Can you help us with that, Charlie?” Charlie kept his eyes out on that diamond, and that blonde blob of hair. He knew if he looked, he would find the auburn blob, somewhere in that crowd, cheering for their son. Maybe it would soothe the ache in his soul he felt. Maybe it wouldn’t. But he didn’t look. He wouldn’t do that to himself. He shifted on the bench. “Yeah, Redsector. You want to know what happened in Redsector? Let me tell you.” Charlie leaned forwards towards the old man. “We were in the corpse of a giant. Its metal skeleton was all around us, invisible in the goddamn rain that never stopped. Sixty of us sat within that carcass, crouched in metal tombs. Survivors. Brothers. A dozen engagements or so between us against those freaks. Made us the most experienced men in Europe, they told us. So, we stood alone, the 139<sup>th</sup>, cause the 113<sup>th</sup> and the 126<sup>th</sup> had already fled, and no one stopped them. I don’t know why we didn’t. I’d been in the 3<sup>rd</sup> when I deployed. Then the 17<sup>th</sup>, then the 56<sup>th</sup>, then the 89<sup>th</sup>. We knew how this went.” Charlie was spitting his words now, so close to almost taste the sweat on the brown-suited mans forehead. “We were going to die, for Rhyan, in hell. For nothing.”

He stopped talking, and sat back in his seat. He was suddenly exhausted, like he had run a marathon. The man had been scribbling on a sheet of paper. He looked up at Charlie. “Go on. Tell us about Arlington.” Charlie opened his mouth to speak, almost committing to sound the miracle every member of the 139<sup>th</sup> had witnessed that day in the valley, when sixty and one men fought the inevitable, and won. He stopped. The pen stopped scribbling. “What’s the matter Charlie?” Charlie started to chuckle, a high-pitched squeak like the air was caught in his throat. “Yeah. Arlington. The cruise missile in the sledgehammer’s back pocket, right? They say, they say he’s a natural disaster, an-an immovable mountain. The-heh, the Heavenly Storm, yeah? A Tank Ace, of course, with over 100, no, 170 confirmed vehicle kills and 4, heh, naval sinkings-” The ball point pen snapped in the man’s hands.

Now he was leaning in towards Charlie. There was no mirth in his face anymore, no grandfatherly demeanor. His eyes were stone cold, the kind of look only people who had



sacrificed a part of themselves could perfect, bore into Charlie. “You don’t know how important this is to us, Charlie. More than you can possibly imagine.” Charlie bobbed his head weakly side to side. He was getting quite tired. “I dunno. Important enough to make up this place.” A cold wind split the afternoon haze. He looked at the man again. “I’m going to ask you again. Who’s we?” The old man stared at him for a moment longer, then clicked his tongue in frustration. He began packing up his briefcase. “Disengage the Telephone. The connection is failing.” Charlie looked back at the diamond as the old man kept talking. He tuned the noise out.

A mist had started to roll across the field, taking away his sight of the game. He kept looking at the blob of hair as it talked and moved. The mist came in. He found himself searching the crowd for that auburn hair. That surprised him. As the world around him faded away, he saw her again, for just a moment. To his relief, he didn’t regret it. He turned his head, propped up against the *Lion*, towards the man in the black suit. A red telephone sat behind him on a silver tray, carried by another black suit. As it clicked back into place, the summer’s heat vanished, and the world came rushing back in. The sweat wasn’t sweat. Lashing rain beat the side of the smoldering wreck, covered by a temporary shelter. He felt the sucking wound just beneath his sternum. It was cold.

The old man said a few words to his aides, then walked over to Charlie. He pulled a thin black pistol from his coat pocket. “I can probably save you. You can see them, just like you did now. Or you can die.” The old man racked the pistol and aimed it towards Charlie’s head. “Who is Arlington? Where is Arlington? I’ll keep tying up loose ends, soldier. I don’t enjoy it. Your friends, your brothers. But you can stop it, right here. Just give me something.” Charlie smiled at the barrel. “You know how I knew it wasn’t real?” The old man didn’t say anything. Charlie slowly reached a hand up to the worn 139 hastily burned into his uniform so long ago. “Cause I, and everyone else in that deadman’s unit, swore they wouldn’t go home until the job was done.” He gripped the numbers with all the strength he had remaining. “Whatever’s... out there in this place, doesn’t belong anywhere else. Hell should stay in Hell, don’t yah think?” The old man was quiet for a moment. “Department of Motor Vehicles, Section 9,” he said. “What?,” said Charlie. A single gunshot rang out, the brief sound of splattering blood mixing with the drum of the rain. “That’s who we are, Charlie.”